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No 22

THE ISLE OF WONDERS
or The Mysteries of
the Echoing Cave



The boys went at it with a will, the sharp reports of their rifles following each other in rapid succession.

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1903, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C. STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 22.

NEW YORK, May 23, 1903.

Price Five Cents.

THE ISLE OF WONDERS;

OR,

The Mysteries of the Echoing Cave.

BY CAPTAIN BASIL BENEDICT.

CHAPTER I.

PLOTTING MUTINY ON BOARD THE FORTUNA—THE EAVESDROPPER.

"Great Neptune! Tony Bright, what's the matter? I should think you'd seen a ghost—or a whole legion of them, for that matter, from the looks of your face."

"You're right, Frank," nodded Harry Halstead, who was seated by his side; "he's as white as a sheet; and if it was only one ghost that frightened him, it must have been that of the 'Flying Dutchman' himself."

"Or, it may be, if there were a number of them," put in Charley Curtiss, "that some shipmaster and his officers were murdered by the crew in this very——"

"Good heavens! boys, hush!" exclaimed Tony Bright, in a low but excited tone, glancing anxiously behind him the while. "Not a word above a whisper, if you value your lives!"

"Why, what is the matter, Tony?" asked Franklin Fleetwood, at once becoming serious. "Is there anything wrong for'ard—any trouble in the fore-castle?"

"Not quite so loud, Mr. Fleetwood, if you please. Yes, there's a great deal wrong. But if I stop here another moment I shall be suspected—if I am not already. See, the boat on the port quarter is swinging low on the davits. Jump in there—all three of you—when you can do so unobserved, and I will come to you in about an hour—when it is quite dark, and the starboard watch has gone below. Mind, now, don't one of you go into the cabin, or they'll say I sent you."

Then, without waiting for a word in reply, Tony Bright hurried forward.

The first-class ship, *Fortuna*, making the voyage from San

Francisco to New South Wales and Victoria, had touched at Honolulu, and now, headed southwest, or southwest by west, was in the immediate vicinity of Ann Ete Isle, that is to say, in latitude 10 north, and longitude 88 west from Washington. Nearly due west lay the Marshall Islands, and beyond these the great archipelago known as the Caroline Islands.

The ship's company consisted of the captain, three mates, and twenty-two men and boys before the mast, and to these must be added Chong Wing, the Chinese cook, or "doctor," as he was more generally called.

The captain, who was also part owner, was Hiram Fleetwood, formerly of Boston, but now of San Francisco.

The first mate was Samuel Slater, a man of forty years of age, a thorough sailor, and a brave and loyal gentleman.

The second mate was Bernard Botsford, only thirty-one years old, but who had seen more than fifteen years of service under Captain Fleetwood's own eyes, and who was therefore to be trusted.

Franklin Fleetwood, the captain's only son, now in his eighteenth year, was the third mate of the *Fortuna*, and it might almost be said that the office had been created for him, for the ship had never had a third mate before.

But Frank, as he was familiarly called, was a good seaman.

He had made several voyages with his father in the *Fortuna*; had spent some time in the Hawaiian and Samoan Islands; understood all his duties as an officer thoroughly, and in many ways was a valuable man to have on board.

Besides the officers and crew there were four passengers.

These were Chester Curtiss, a wealthy importer of San Fran-

cisco, who was going to Australia on important business; Charley Curtiss, his son, not yet sixteen; Harry Halstead, the captain's nephew, about a year older than Charley, who was making the voyage merely for health and pleasure, and Arty Arvine, a boy of less than twelve, whose father was Mr. Curtiss' agent at Melbourne, and who now, under that gentleman's guardianship, was going out to join his parents in the great island continent.

The crew, on the whole, was nothing more than ordinary.

In the main, it was made up of foreigners, men from every clime under the sun, as is almost always the case in these degenerate days of our merchant-marine.

But there were a few among the number who should receive passing notice, and first of these was Dick Brown, the boatswain, a powerfully built man of forty-nine years, forty of which had been spent at sea.

Then there was Bill Morgan, the ship's carpenter, not quite so old as Dick, and Silas Sanders, Josh Jopson and Dan Walker.

Among the men forward there were two boys, who, it might be said, were serving their apprenticeship. These were Tom Tracy and Tony Bright, the first in his seventeenth year, and the latter not quite sixteen.

It was known to the officers of the *Fortuna* that there was some dissatisfaction among the crew, for signs of it had been cropping out for weeks. It had been promised at the time they shipped, so the men claimed, that instead of taking the Hawaiian Islands in their course, they would bear more to the south, and touch at the Samoan, the Tahitian, and possibly the Tonga group, and so give them all a taste of real South Sea Island life, such as can no longer be enjoyed in the Hawaiian Islands.

This had really been the owner's purpose, but at the last moment they were obliged to change their plans, in order to secure a valuable consignment which would go far toward defraying the expenses of the voyage.

This fact the crew, or at least the major part of them, could not understand, and the captain hardly thought it worth his while to try to explain it to them.

They were now rapidly approaching the equator, and were almost directly north of the Samoan group, though already a little to the west, and the distance would be increasing every day. This fact, communicated to the rest by Silas Sanders, who was something more than an ordinary sailor, and one of the chief malcontents, had greatly increased the ill feeling among the crew.

"This really looks serious," said Frank Fleetwood, in a grave, thoughtful tone, after Tony had left them. "I wish I knew just what kind of a plot the villains were concocting."

"Then you really think they are bent on mischief?" asked Charley Curtiss, anxiously.

"There can be no kind of doubt of it. Tony Bright's face was enough to settle that question. He must have overheard them while they were arranging their plans."

"I wish your father knew about it, and mine, too, for that matter."

"I wish they did; but, as Tony hinted, it won't do to tell them now."

"Why not, Frank?"

"Don't you see? That sneak, Silas Sanders, has his eyes upon us. I'll warrant he more than half suspects Tony has been telling us something."

"But what shall we do? Sit here quietly, with our hands folded, and let them take possession of the ship and murder us and all our friends? For it isn't at all likely that they would spare any of us."

"No, Charley, not quite so bad as that. We will do exactly as Tony suggested; for he is bright by nature as well as by

name, and knows just what he's about, so he is not likely to lead us far astray."

"Then we are to climb into that boat, when we get a chance, and wait for him to join us there?"

"Yes, that's exactly what we will do. But, mind you, neither Silas Sanders nor Josh Jopson must see us make the move."

"And, if you will take my advice," added Harry Halsted, "you will keep a watchful eye on that sinister-looking Spaniard, Miguel Gonzalo."

"Quite right, Harry," assented his cousin. "If that scowling villain isn't the evil one himself, I'm ready to make oath that he's a near relation at least."

"For my part," observed Charley Curtiss, "I can't see why the men will permit such wretches to gain an influence over them, or why they should even listen to anything they have to say."

"That's easy enough to explain," said Frank. "In the first place, those who do listen are evil themselves at heart; and then, I suspect, all of them are more or less afraid of the scoundrel."

"That's about it," nodded Harry, approvingly. Then, turning to the companionway: "But, hello! here's Arty coming. Now what does he want?"

Arty Arvine was a delicate-looking boy, rather small for his age; but he was a bright and handsome little fellow, and a great favorite with all on board, even the roughest of the sailors.

"Frank," he exclaimed, as he hastened to join the trio on the quarter-deck, "the captain wants to see you in the cabin immediately. He sent me to tell you so."

"All right, little chap," returned Frank, as he slowly arose to his feet; "he shall have his want gratified."

"There!" exclaimed Charley, excitedly, "now you've got a chance to tell them."

"Yes," assented young Fleetwood; "they can't object to my going into the cabin when I'm summoned, I suppose. But the question is, will they be satisfied?"

"Ah! that's more than I can tell," said Harry Halsted, musingly.

"What are you fellows talking about, anyway?" asked Arty, with eager interest.

"There, now," laughed Frank, "you see how true the old adage is that says 'Little pitchers have big ears.'"

"What! you think I have big ears, do you?" exclaimed Arty, indignantly. "They're not half as big as yours, so now!"

"That's all right, my boy," smiled Frank. "Now you just stay here with Harry and Charley till they send you away, and then come down into the cabin at once, do you understand?"

"Yes; but why—"

"There, never mind the why and wherefore, now, but do just as I say. Boys," he added, significantly, as he turned to his friends, "you know when to send him," and as they each gave him an affirmative nod, he hastened down the companionway.

He found his father, Mr. Slater, the first mate, and Mr. Curtiss, who was also a part owner in the ship, seated together about a small table in the captain's cabin.

"You sent for me, sir?" said Frank, addressing his father in a respectful tone.

"Yes, my boy," was the answer; "I wanted to ask you a question. Mr. Slater, here, feels confident that there is mischief brewing among the men. Have you seen anything during the past twenty-four hours that would lead you to the same conclusion?"

"You know, father, that there has been a feeling of discontent in the fore-castle from the very start, and that it has been growing more manifest ever since we left Honolulu."

"Yes, yes, we all know that; but what I want to get at is, whether there is any danger of this feeling ripening into an overt act of mutiny."

"Then, to be perfectly frank with you, I think there is great and immediate danger," replied Frank, gravely.

"You have good reason for thinking so, I take it?"

"Yes, sir, the best reason in the world."

"It is as I feared," murmured Slater.

"Let us hear what you have to say with regard to the matter," commanded the captain, and Mr. Curtiss drew his chair nearer.

"All I can tell you at present," said Frank, "is merely this: About half an hour ago, while Harry, Charley and myself were seated on the quarter-deck, Tony Bright suddenly appeared before us, with a face as pale as death itself. I at once demanded to know what was the matter, and he intimated that the men were on the eve of open mutiny."

"How did he know?" asked Mr. Curtiss, quickly.

"He must have overheard them laying their plans."

"Who are the ringleaders?"

"He only had time to name one—Silas Sanders."

"Yes, I was sure he was at the bottom of the business," commented the first mate. "An evil-minded man. I wish he had never set foot aboard this ship."

"There's another quite as bad, I think," mused the captain.

"Do you mean Miguel Gonzalo?" asked Frank.

"Yes, that's the man."

"Then I am sure you are right, for I believe that fellow would no more hesitate to shoot us all down in our tracks than as though we were so many dogs."

"But there are others almost as bloodthirsty as he," said the mate. "For instance, there's that little Italian, Giuseppe Bassano. I believe it would be a real pleasure to him to drive that ugly poniard of his through my heart."

"Yes," assented the captain, "and there's that big Haytian negro—Gabriel, as he calls himself. I don't believe he's got even so much as a shadow of a conscience."

"You're right enough there, captain," said Slater. "There's nothing in the world to distinguish the creature from the brutes but the fact that he can jabber a little in Spanish, and walk on two legs."

"But one moment, gentlemen," said Mr. Curtiss, somewhat impatiently. "I want to ask Frank here, why it was he did not get more information from that boy Tony, when he was about it?"

"Because," answered Frank, "he was being watched by Sanders, Jopson, and some others, and it wouldn't do to arouse their suspicions."

"Ah, I see; but didn't you arrange to meet him later?"

"Yes, we are to climb into the boat on the port quarter, and he is to join us there."

"When?"

"In an hour's time, and the hour must be nearly up now."

"Then go at once my boy!" exclaimed the captain, promptly, "and rejoin us here as soon as possible."

At this moment Arty burst into the cabin.

"Frank!" he cried, "Harry and Charley want you to come on deck immediately. They're waiting for you."

"All right, little chap, they shall not have long to wait."

And leaving the cabin, Frank sprang up the companionway.

He looked about him.

There was no one on the quarter-deck.

It was now quite dark, and he could not very well see what was going on forward.

He advanced cautiously as far as the caboose.

The starboard watch had gone below, and the watch now on deck was huddled in the lee of the main hatch, and directly in front of the caboose.

Frank could only catch a few words of their conversation, but

he was concerned to know that it was all in condemnation of the officers, and in praise of Sanders, Jopson, Gonzalo, and the other ringleaders.

He made his way aft on the port side, and when he had reached the boat paused; and after a hasty glance around, to make sure that he was not observed, climbed in.

His two friends were already there, and he crouched down by their side.

A few minutes later they heard a cautious footstep approaching, and the next moment Tony joined them.

"At last we are by ourselves," he said, in a tone of satisfaction and relief; "and now I can say what I want to, without the uncomfortable feeling that some one is watching me, or listening to every word."

But he was wrong; for, although he little dreamed it, there was a cunning spy at hand.

Tony's every movement had been jealously watched from the moment he had accosted the boys on the quarter-deck; and now, crouching under the boat, was the burly form of Silas Sanders, and his eager ears were drinking in every word that was uttered over his head.

CHAPTER II.

THE OFFICERS AND PASSENGERS BESIEGED IN THE CABIN.

"Well, Tony," said Frank, after the young sailor had fixed himself comfortably in the bottom of the boat, "perhaps you can judge how anxious we are to hear what you have to say, when you think that we have been waiting a whole hour for an explanation of the dark hints you gave us."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Tony, quickly; "and just let me tell you that this same hour has seemed like a perfect age to me as well as you."

"Well, what is it, Tony?" asked Charley Curtiss, impatiently. "What black villainy has that scoundrel, Silas Sanders, been concocting?"

"He is going to take the ship to-night."

"To-night!"

"Yes, at eight bells he and all those in the plot will take possession of the deck, kill the mate on duty, and all who oppose them, then disguise the ship as thoroughly as possible, and make for the Samoan Islands."

"The Samoan Islands! That wouldn't be a very safe place for a gang of mutineers if they were suspected."

"He thinks differently. He would alter the ship's papers, of course, and then sell her to the Germans there—the great firm of Goddefray & Co., you know—who hate the Americans, and so wouldn't be too inquisitive about the matter, for they are ready to do anything—go any length to destroy our commerce in these waters."

"Well, after they have disposed of the ship, what then?"

"Why, then Sanders and his men will retire to the island of Savaii, where he says an army could not find and take them."

"Savaii, that is one of the Samoan group," said Frank.

"Yes, the largest island of all, and contains some of the most wonderful caverns and underground galleries in the world."

"I have heard as much; but let us get back to the ship, and the danger that threatens us. Do the mutineers intend to kill the officers and passengers in the cabin in cold blood?"

"I am sorry to say it, Frank, but that is their deliberate intention."

"Are you certain on this point?"

"Quite certain. They say that your father, yourself, and the other two mates, and Mr. Curtiss, must die."

"And my two friends here, and Arty?"

"They will make them useful for a while, and then, for fear of their tongues, will throw them overboard."

"My God, this is terrible!" exclaimed Charley, in a faltering voice.

"Don't fret yet, old boy," said Frank, soothingly. "There is a vast difference between proposing to do a thing and doing it, as I trust these scoundrels will soon find out. How many are in the plot, Tony?"

"I'm ashamed to tell you, sir."

"But do so, nevertheless."

"Well, then, all are in it but the boatswain, the carpenter, and my messmate, Tom Tracy."

"Good for Tom! I knew we could count on Brown and Morgan."

"But what shall we do?" asked Halstead. "No time should be lost, it seems to me. Just think of it, there's nearly, if not quite, twenty men against us."

"You're right, Harry, we must warn those in the cabin at once. And Tony, you must take care of yourself. At the slightest sign of danger you—"

"Boys, boys! Quick, to the cabin! to the cabin for your lives!"

These words were spoken in an excited whisper by a youth of seventeen—Tom Tracy, in fact; and even while he was speaking, he helped the boys from the boat and hurried with them toward the companionway.

Before they reached it, however, there was a hoarse yell forward, then a rush of many feet, and then half a dozen pistol shots, which, fortunately, did no harm, and a moment later all the boys were safe in the cabin below.

"What is it? What's the trouble?" exclaimed the captain and Mr. Curtiss in one voice, as they started to their feet.

"The struggle has begun; the fiends have commenced their devilish work," replied Frank, bitterly.

"It is fortunate, then," said his father, "that I did not wait till the last moment to do what I have done."

"What was that?"

"Bring all the arms and ammunition here. There's nothing of the kind they can get hold of now, excepting such weapons as may belong to themselves. But Mr. Botsford—where is he?"

"I saw Gonzalo knock him down with a belaying pin just as we were making for the companionway."

"But Brown and Morgan? I would stake my life that they are not among the mutineers," said the captain, positively.

"You are right, sir," responded Tom. "But I can tell you nothing definitely about them. I fear, however, they are dead."

Hardly had the words passed his lips when there was a rush down the companionway, and a tremendous pounding on the door.

"What's wanted there?" demanded the captain, sternly.

"There's no use, Captain Fleetwood; we have full possession of the ship, and we mean to hold it. If you want to save bloodshed, there's just one thing you can do—submit quietly. Then we'll give you the two best boats, with complete outfits, and you, and all in the cabin with you, can depart unmolested."

"Is that you, Sanders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you speak by authority—that is, in the name of all the mutineers?"

"The crew of this ship have selected me to be their captain, and hence I am acting as such. What I have proposed meets with their full approval."

"Where is Mr. Botsford?"

"I am sorry to say he has met with an accident—a slight wound in the head."

"And Brown and Morgan, where are they?"

"They will be taken care of, sir, never fear," was the evasive answer.

"I understand. And now listen, Silas Sanders. I will make no terms with you or any of your cutthroat crew that does not include my second mate, boatswain and carpenter. I would be a coward otherwise. And now go, and be sure of one thing—we will hold this cabin till we starve, or the ship is at the bottom of the sea, rather than submit to anything but honorable terms."

"You think so now," sneered the ringleader of the mutineers; "but I'll have you all out of that before to-morrow morning, either dead or alive." Then to his followers:

"Half a dozen of you remain here, and shoot down the first man who attempts to leave the cabin. I'll soon teach them a thing or two," and he sprang up the companion-stairs.

The next moment the skylight was forced open, and half a dozen shots were fired into the cabin.

But Captain Fleetwood had suspected what was coming, and had warned his friends to seek shelter. One bullet, however, struck the first mate in the left shoulder, inflicting a slight flesh wound.

"Keep perfectly quiet," advised the captain. "More of them will take part in the fun presently, and then we will endeavor to give them a lesson they'll remember. Are your Winchesters ready?"

"Yes, yes!" was the eager answer. And they waited.

They were not kept long in suspense. Soon no less than a dozen men surrounded the skylight, some with revolvers, one with a rifle he had managed to steal, and another with a long pole, to the end of which he had hastily lashed a keen-edged knife.

The bullets now began to fly around the little cabin at a lively rate, and the man with the extemporized spear succeeded in making it quite uncomfortable for Charley and Arty, who had taken up their quarters in one of the berths.

But his fun was not to last long. Captain Fleetwood had his eye upon him, and waiting a favorable opportunity, he suddenly brought his Winchester to his shoulder and fired.

The man gave a yell, dropped his weapon into the cabin, and fell forward on the grating, dead. The bullet had penetrated his left eye, and lodged in his brain.

With a muttered curse from Sanders, and a fearful malediction from Gonzalo, the body was pulled away, and then, after a moment's pause, the firing was renewed.

Presently Harry Halstead received a shot in the fleshy part of one of his long legs, which he had found it somewhat difficult to conceal. The pain, after a moment or so, irritated him, and he resolved to return the compliment with interest.

Sanders was kneeling at the skylight above, and directly in front of him, preparing to take aim at Mr. Curtiss. Just behind him there was a man standing with a loaded revolver in his hand.

Harry raised his weapon and fired.

At that very instant Sanders turned to reply to something the man behind him had said, and Harry's bullet carried off the end of his nose, and then lodging in the other's heart, he fell back upon the deck dead.

"A pretty good shot that," said Harry, complacently; "one dead, and another disfigured for life. What's the matter with yours truly?"

"Oh, you're right enough so far," answered Frank, "but we can't keep this sort of thing up long without some of us getting killed or desperately wounded, unless we adopt new measures."

"Well, what do you propose?" asked Mr. Curtiss.

"To put out the light, in the first place; then, while they can't see us, we shall be able to get a glimpse of them in the faint moonlight. After that I propose to force this door which communicates with your stateroom, and there Arty, at least, will be comparatively safe."

"A good idea, Frank," exclaimed his father. "Douse the glim at once."

This was easier said than done, for under the circumstances, no one cared to venture forward to do it.

But Frank presently accomplished his object by throwing his cap at the light, and thus extinguishing it.

This unexpected move caused some grumbling on the part of the besiegers, and one of them, who incautiously bent forward to peer into the gloom, received a pellet of lead in the shoulder, to remind him to be more careful in his investigations.

After a time the mutineers seemed to have left the skylight, and Frank and his friends took advantage of their absence to open the door connecting the captain's cabin with Mr. Curtiss' stateroom.

He next examined the fastenings of the outer door of the stateroom, to make sure that they were secure.

While thus engaged, he heard a slight noise at the cabin window.

Wondering what it could mean, he approached, and peering through the thick and obscure glass, could see a shadow on the outside but nothing more.

The slight noise was repeated, and then a whispered voice reached him.

"Open! Open quickly!" and without an instant's hesitation he opened the window.

CHAPTER III.

TAKING TO THE BOATS—A STUPENDOUS SPECTACLE AND AN AWFUL FATE.

"Ah! thanks, Master Frank," came the voice from the outside, "I thought I could get at you this way, and glad I am to see you."

"Bill Morgan!" exclaimed Frank, "you're alive, then?"

"Yes, thank God. But no thanks to the bloody fiends on deck, though."

"Well, come in, if you can get through the opening, and tell us all about it."

"Oh, I can get through fast enough. I knew which deadlight to knock at, you understand," and with some little difficulty the carpenter made his way into the stateroom.

By this time all had gathered around him, eager to hear what he had to say.

"How comes it that you managed to escape the wretches?" asked Mr. Curtiss.

"I'm here simply because they think I'm dead," was the answer. "That brute Jopson knocked me down, and then ordered me to be thrown overboard. But he didn't strike a square blow and I recovered consciousness before I struck the water. I caught hold of a rope, and managed to hold on until I had regained strength enough to swim forward and grasp the main-chains, then I took breath, and hoisting myself up, contrived to reach the extremity of the cutwater. Here I rested, and kept my eyes about me."

"Then," exclaimed the captain, impatiently, "perhaps you can inform us as to the fate of Botsford and Brown?"

"Fortunately I can."

"Are they alive?"

"They are alive."

"Where are they?"

"The mate is close at hand, and the bo's'n not far off."

"One close at hand and the other not far off! Please explain."

"Why, soon after I'd got fixed in my position, I saw all the men rushing aft. Then, by means of the bowsprit, I reached the forecandle, and so descended to the deck."

"The first thing to attract my attention was Dick Brown, securely lashed to the foremast. I cut his cords at once, then he pointed out the unconscious form of the second mate, lying near the main hatchway."

"Dick suggested that we try to save his life by concealing him in the boat swinging from the stern davits. I promptly assented, and volunteered to reconnoiter."

"Cautiously I made my way aft, and found that all the men were either in the cabin or about the skylight; even the man at the wheel had left his post in order to see what was going on, lashing the wheel meantime, so as not to throw the ship out of her course."

"I hastened back, informed Dick of the situation, and together we brought the unconscious mate back of the roundhouse, and lowered him into the stern-boat. Then, leaving Dick on the watch, I climbed down to yonder window, and succeeded in attracting your attention."

"Well done, Bill!" exclaimed Frank, approvingly. "And now let's hasten to get those two brave men in here out of danger."

"Take this key," said the captain, hastily; "it will let you into the little private storeroom yonder, which is lighted by one of the stern windows. You can easily accomplish your object by means of that."

And so they did, for ten minutes later the second mate was safe in Mr. Curtiss' berth, and Dick Brown was shaking hands with the captain and all his other friends.

"For some reason or other," announced Dick, presently, "the villains have altered the ship's course, and we're now headed due west."

"They must be making for one of the Marshall group, or possibly for the Caroline Islands beyond," suggested Frank.

"No doubt you're right, sir," assented Dick.

"I shouldn't wonder," smiled the captain.

Strange to say, no more attention was paid to the prisoners in the cabin that night. The next day a few shots were fired through the skylight, and one or two attempts were made to force the doors, but no serious damage was done.

Then a whole week passed, and little was seen or heard of the mutineers. Contrary to all custom, they neither got drunk nor quarreled among themselves.

"What does it all mean?" the prisoners asked each other many times a day, and at last they came to the conclusion that they were to be starved out.

At the end of the tenth day there was no change, and Bill Morgan volunteered to reconnoiter, and see what he could learn.

"If they catch sight of me, you know," he said, with a grim smile, "they'll be sure to take me for a ghost, and be half frightened out of their wits."

But Bill Morgan didn't go on deck that night; for even while he was talking a terrible storm came up—such a storm as is only known in those latitudes, and for days the ship was driven westward before the winds.

At length the storm abated, and when midnight came, Bill climbed through the stern window, and cautiously made his way on deck.

With great care he managed to get within earshot of a group consisting of Sanders, Jopson, Gonzalo and half a dozen others, and from their conversation he learned that, during the storm,

one man had been washed overboard, and one of the wounded men had died; so that, in all, they had lost four men by death, and there were still two seriously wounded.

But Bill learned something more than this. He learned that the mutineers had concocted a diabolical scheme whereby to rid themselves of the prisoners in the cabin by one fatal blow. His cheeks blanched while he listened, and as speedily as possible he made his way back to the cabin and reported.

There was a moment of painful silence, and then, in a calm voice, the captain asked:

"When is this scheme to be carried out?"

"To-morrow night."

"Then we must venture forth and attack them to-night while they are unprepared."

"No use, these doors are carefully guarded, and then the whole crew is now thoroughly armed. You must have forgotten those cases of rifles and boxes of cartridges stored forward. They have found them, and would make good use of them, too, if you stepped outside of this cabin."

"Then what do you propose?"

"Just this: We must be somewhere in the neighborhood of the Ralick Islands, I take it, or perhaps even further west, and so in the very midst of a vast archipelago of coral isles. Now, there are twelve of us, and my idea is to equip and provision two boats, put three men and three boys in each, and as soon as it is quite dark to-morrow night leave the ship."

"But can we provision two boats?" asked Mr. Curtiss.

"Yes," nodded the captain; "though they little suspect it, I have plenty of provisions here."

"But the boats," said Frank. "I suppose we shall have little trouble in securing one, but how about the others?"

"I'll look out for that," said Bill Morgan, confidently.

"Then why not start to-night?" asked Mr. Curtiss, nervously. "After what you have told us, I shall not know a moment's peace of mind till we're well out of this ship."

"I'm only afraid we couldn't get so far away before daylight but what they'd find us."

"If you'll manage to have one of the other boats under the stern in twenty minutes," said Frank, "we'll agree to have both thoroughly equipped and provisioned inside of an hour, so there need be no further fear on that head."

"All right," exclaimed Bill, cheerfully, and he quickly disappeared through the cabin window.

All hands now set to work lading the stern-boat, and indeed, the provisions, arms and complete outfits for both boats were piled into this, and when all were on board, the boat was lowered to the water, where Morgan was already waiting with the quarter-boat.

One after another the fugitives now climbed through the stern window, and descended by means of the davit ropes, Arty being passed down by Brown and received by Morgan. Then the boys, for convenience sake, while a portion of the outfits were being transferred, remained in the larger boat.

The transferring was nearly completed, and Tom Tracy had just sprung into the quarter-boat, to take Brown's place, who was just ready to jump into the other, when a loud yell from the deck of the ship startled them all.

"Cast off! cast off!" cried the captain and first mate in a breath, and the order was promptly obeyed on board both boats, and they quickly fell astern and were swallowed up in the darkness.

But soon they saw the flash, and heard the report of a dozen rifle shots, and the leaden pellets fell all around them.

Then, as they listened, they heard the order given to bring the ship to, and soon another order—to lower the boats.

Frank had thought, if they had both boats handy, they could equip them and get away in an hour's time, but, in point of fact, it had taken three, and now, in another hour it would be daylight.

With him in the larger boat there were four others—Harry Halstead, Charley Curtiss, Arty Arvine, and Tony Bright—five in all. The rest were in the other boat.

But the other boat was nowhere in sight, and Frank dare not hail it, for to do so would be to direct the mutineers, who had already manned and lowered a boat, to the spot where they were.

"There is only one thing for us to do," said Frank, "and that is to keep the boat headed in a westerly direction; that was the last order father gave, and we may hope, I think, to fall in with our friends in the morning."

The morning came, and for an hour or two not a speck was to be seen on the surface of the broad ocean. But at length Tony's keen eyes made out a boat a long distance ahead.

"It's our friends, thank God!" exclaimed Charley, excitedly.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Tony, significantly; "for my belief is that the boat ahead of us contains the party we're most anxious to avoid."

Another hour passed, and, strange to say, the party in the foremost boat seemed not to have noticed the boys behind them.

"They think we're still ahead of them," Tony said.

But at length they were discovered, and then the other boat instantly put about.

A steady though gentle breeze had sprung up, and it was suggested that the mast be stepped and the sail rigged. This was promptly done by Frank and Tony. The boat's course was then laid west by north, and she began moving through the water at a rapidly increasing rate.

When the wind first sprang up the sky had become slightly overcast with broken masses of clouds, of a peculiar and unusual appearance. From the most considerable of these masses, radiated as from a center, long lines, like pencils of light, running in straight, regularly diverging rays to the ocean.

The other boat had quickly altered its course to intercept the boys, and now a lively chase commenced.

It had been kept up for nearly half an hour, and the mutineers—for there was no longer any doubt about their character—were perceptibly drawing nearer, when Frank observed in the southwest a peculiarly shaped cloud, to which a dark column, extending downward to the sea, appeared to be attached.

This column was quite narrow at the base, but enlarged as it rose, until just below the point of union with the cloud it spread outward like a Gothic pillar, diverging into arches as it meets the roof.

Frank surveyed this wonderful spectacle for several minutes in silence; he too well understood its true character.

It was also observed by the mutineers, and from their exclamations and gestures, they evidently viewed it with apprehension and dread.

It was moving slowly forward, and now all the boys watched it with feelings in which alarm began to predominate over curiosity and interest.

"It appears to be moving northwest before the wind," said Harry, at length; "if it keeps on its present course it will pass us by a safe distance."

"Yes, but how about the mutineers?" asked Charley.

"Why, they have but to steer a little more to the north, and—"

But at that moment the waterspout seemed to alter its course

slightly and move with increased rapidity directly toward the other boat.

Onward it came, towering to the skies, and darkening the ocean with its tremendous bulk.

The mutineers, with the exception of one man, threw themselves down in the bottom of the boat in abject terror. It was, indeed, an appalling spectacle, and calculated to shake the stoutest heart, to see that vast mass of water, enough, as it seemed, to swamp the navies of the world, suspended so strangely over them.

The man who kept his place appeared to be urging the others to make some exertion, but in vain. At last, starting to his feet, and casting one shuddering look at the dark column, he clasped his hands above his head and plunged into the sea. In a moment he came to the surface, and struck out vigorously for the other boat.

The doomed mutineers were already within the influence of the waterspout, being drawn toward it with the violently-agitated waters about its base; a moment more and they were lost to sight in the circle of mist and spray that enveloped the foot of the column.

Then a strong oscillation began to be visible in the body of the waterspout; it swayed heavily to and fro; the cloud at its apex seemed to stoop, and the whole mass broke and fell, with a noise that might have been heard for miles. The sea far around was crushed into smoothness by the shock; immediately where the vast pillar had stood it boiled like a caldron; then a succession of waves, white with foam, came circling outward from the spot, extending even to the boys' boat.

The sailor swam faster than the boys sailed, and soon was within a few feet of them. All were gazing toward him, wondering who he might be, when Frank, reaching out his hand to help him in, saw the evil face of Miguel Gonzalo!

At that instant Arty uttered a cry of horror, and pointed behind them.

They turned, and beheld another tremendous waterspout impending over them!

CHAPTER IV.

ATTACKED BY SAVAGES—THE BOAT AND ARTY GONE.

That was an awful moment for the five boys in the boat.

They gazed at the new source of danger as if fascinated.

This last waterspout, unlike the first, was a cylindrical column of about the same diameter throughout its entire length, extending in a straight and unbroken line from the ocean to the heavens.

Its upper extremity was lost amid a mass of clouds, in which the youthful spectators fancied they could perceive the effects of the gradual diffusion of the water drawn from the sea, as it wound its way upward with a rapid, spiral motion, and poured into that vast elevated reservoir.

As the process went on the cloud grew darker, and seemed to bend downward with its accumulating weight of waters.

The position of the boys was one of the utmost danger. They had changed their course to avoid the first waterspout, and now, without dreaming of such a thing, they were suddenly confronted by another, still nearer at hand.

For a moment all was confusion, indecision and dismay.

"Port, Frank, port!" cried Tony, suddenly. "Our one chance is to lay her head on the old course again, and sail as near the wind as we can. Then the thundering waterspout is likely to pass us on the starboard quarter."

Frank instantly acted on this advice, and the fore and aft rig of

the boat enabled them to sail nearer the wind than they otherwise could have done.

In a minute or two the distance between them and the terrible object of their dread had widened so perceptibly as to remove in a measure their fearful apprehensions.

But this was only for a moment; for hardly had they tacked again, when, notwithstanding that they were to the windward of it, the waterspout began to move rapidly toward them.

Its course was not direct and uniform, but it veered now to the right and now to the left, rendering it difficult for Frank to decide which way to steer in order to avoid it.

The young man sat at the helm, pale, but quite calm and collected, his eyes steadfastly fixed on the advancing column, while Arty crouched by his side, holding fast one of his hands in both his own. Tony held the sheet, and stood ready to shift the sail, as the emergency might require.

Onward it came, towering above them, a spectacle fearful enough to appall the stoutest heart; and Arty, with a sob of terror, hid his face in young Fleetwood's lap.

His sob was echoed by a groan of agony and despair, coming apparently from beyond the stern of the boat.

Frank turned quickly, and beheld the repulsive face of Miguel Gonzalo, wearing such an expression of fear and dread as he had never seen on a human countenance before.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "I had forgotten all about you till this very moment."

"It makes no difference now," gasped the Spaniard, who was holding on by a stern line. "*Dios de mi alma!* you as well as I are beyond the reach of help. In another moment Davy Jones will have us all."

"It may not be as bad as that," said Frank, encouragingly. "At any rate, let me help you into the boat," and motioning to Harry to take the tiller, he reached out his hand and helped him aboard.

A moment later the waterspout seemed to come to a stand, and then, suddenly taking a new course, it began moving rapidly toward the northeast.

Presently, and without any apparent cause whatever, the whole thing collapsed, as the other had done, and in a short time the sea resumed its usual appearance, and every trace of the wonderful phenomenon was gone.

"Thank God, that danger is passed!" said Charley, fervently. "And now what shall we do?"

"The first thing," said Frank, "if the thing be possible, is to find our friends."

"What! do you doubt our ability to do so?" exclaimed Charley, in a tone of alarm.

"It would certainly be nothing strange if we did not," was the reply. "Just think what a mere atom a boat is on this wide expanse of water."

The afternoon and night were spent in drifting slowly through the water, none of the party sleeping much, and the Spaniard, Gonzalo, who had been rescued, crouching, unnoticed, in the stern.

The first light of morning revealed to them a small but lovely isle about two miles ahead.

The sail was at once hoisted and the boat's head laid for the land.

Soon the vicinity of the outer barrier of coral was reached. They coasted along this for some distance, until they found an opening in the reef, which, passing through, they made straight for the island beyond.

Tony soon pointed out a good spot for landing, and Frank skillfully brought the boat close in shore at this point.

"Now, then, shall we all get out?" asked Harry Halstead, eagerly.

"I hardly think that would be wise," returned his cousin. "Two at least should stay by the boat."

"And who shall those two be? For my part I'm for the shore."

"And I want to go too," exclaimed Charley. "I'm sure my father is here somewhere, and I want to join him as quickly as possible."

"Very well," said Tony, before Frank could speak, "I'll stay by the boat, and the little chap had better stay with me."

"That, I think, is the best plan we could adopt," said Frank, in a relieved tone. "And now, Harry and Charley, let's see which of us shall be the first to set foot on dry land."

"Belay there!" exclaimed Tony, in a peremptory tone. "You wouldn't be such fools as to go ashore unarmed, would you?"

"Right, Tony, quite right," returned Frank, stopping short, "and I should have had more sense. Boys, each of you take a Winchester and a revolver. We don't know what kind of a reception we shall meet with yonder."

Both Harry and Charley armed themselves as they had been directed, and Frank, after carefully selecting a rifle and brace of revolvers, sprang overboard, followed by the others, and together they made their way to the shore.

They had hardly touched land when all three became conscious that they were being watched by several naked savages from the dense undergrowth a short distance up the bank.

"What shall we do, Frank?" asked Harry. "It's evident enough they're not our friends, or they wouldn't remain in hiding."

"There is but one thing we can do," was the answer. "We must drive them from cover, for we can't pursue the object of our search with an enemy in our rear, and worse than that, between us and our boat."

"You're right," exclaimed Charley. "Come on," and he started boldly up the bank.

The next moment half a dozen spears fell among them, one of which carried Charley's hat from his head.

"Confound the wretches!" he grumbled, as he stooped to pick it up, "they've almost completely ruined my derby, and the sun's too everlastingly hot for me to go uncovered."

"Come on!" cried Frank; "we must be upon them before they have a chance to attack us again."

And in another moment they were making their way into the undergrowth.

A flight of arrows was the welcome they received, and Frank and Harry each found one sticking in his coat.

At that instant Charley caught sight of two or three natives, and, his blood being up, he instantly raised his rifle and fired.

With a yell one of the savages sprang into the air, and fell back upon the earth, dead.

The others turned, and, being reinforced by five or six more, advanced upon the boys with heavy war clubs and other weapons.

There was nothing for it but to fight in dead earnest, and the boys went at it with a will, the sharp reports of their rifles following each other in rapid succession, while the islanders kept up a yelling that fairly rivaled the noise made by the firearms.

Soon the boys became aware that they had received reinforcements, and looking around, found Tony hard at it pouring death and destruction into the rapidly-diminishing band of savages.

Presently the fight was over, and the last of the foe had fled from the field.

The boys now advanced, and upon looking around, found no less than nine natives dead or wounded among the undergrowth.

They pressed forward, and soon came to a wide open space,

where a fire had been kindled and food cooked in an underground oven, after the manner of the South Sea Islanders.

On one side they discovered a spring and a little stream of water, and not far from this a native boy bound securely to a stake.

The prisoner was a fine-looking lad, not very dark—not so dark, even, as many Spaniards—and was apparently about fourteen or fifteen years of age.

Frank advanced slowly, fell on one knee, and placing his hand under the prisoner's chin, raised his head and gazed wonderingly into his face.

"Tuataga!" he at length exclaimed, in accents of astonishment; "how came you here—almost two thousand miles away from home?"

"Ah, my good friend—dear Papalanji!" exclaimed the boy, with a look of pleasure; "I cannot tell you all now; but I was kidnaped by the enemies of my people, those who are anxious to gain possession of our islands, and was left by them upon one of the Marshall group, where these wicked men found me and took me prisoner."

While the captive was making this brief explanation, Frank was busy severing his bonds, and as he assisted him to his feet, he said:

"Boys, this is Tuataga, a prince of the Island of Savaii, the largest of the Samoan Islands. I met him at Upolu a year or more since, and at that time we became great friends."

The boys all shook hands with the young chief, when Frank, after exchanging a few words with him in his native tongue, suddenly exclaimed:

"Boys, we must hasten back to the boat, there is not a moment to be lost; I ought to have known better than to have neglected poor little Arty so long."

Without a word they all turned and hurried to the shore. They soon arrived at the spot where they had left the boat, but it was no longer there. Eagerly they ran up and down the shore, but no trace of it could they find—the boat and their little companion, Arty, were gone.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAD MAN'S HAND.

There was a surprise waiting when they returned to the boat. Gonzalo was gone. Tony explained that he had tried to sail away with the boat. Tony had fired on him, and the Spaniard hearing the others approaching, had fled to the woods, taking a Winchester rifle with him.

It was at once decided that they should leave the island at once, and all embarked, including Tuataga.

As the little craft was being got under headway, Tony kept a sharp lookout for Gonzalo, and at length spied him, standing on the highest point of the headland where he himself had been a while before.

In his left hand the mutineer held a Winchester rifle, which he had stolen from the boat, and when he saw that he was observed, he raised it to his shoulder, but not being able to use his right arm he could not manage very well.

Tony bent forward, and picking up his own rifle, prepared to take aim.

His movements were effective, for the next instant the Spaniard had disappeared from view.

"Now for the passage and the open ocean beyond," exclaimed Tony, in a tone of relief and satisfaction. "I don't know what our fate may be, but for my part, I am ready to risk anything rather than to live within a hundred miles of that scoundrel."

"Or to die at his hands," added Harry, sententiously.

"Ay, exactly; and without any chance to defend one's self. For he would steal upon us like a thief in the night, and murder us in cold blood, like the coward he is."

By this time they had reached the opening in the barrier reef, and with a little skillful managing, passed through and out upon the restless ocean.

From Tuataga they had learned that there was a large and fertile island at no very great distance to the northwest. It was inhabited by friendly natives, he had heard his captors say; and, moreover, several ships called there in the course of every year.

It was unanimously agreed, then, as it lay directly in the course marked out for them, that they would try to find this island.

All through the day they sailed on, and nothing occurred to disturb the monotony of the voyage.

During the night the wind continued fair, and animated by the hopes Tuataga's statement had given them, they kept a strict lookout, confident that they should reach land soon after daylight the next morning.

But morning came and there was no land in sight, and the day passed and another night; and so five days and nights went by, and still no land, no boat, nothing whatever appeared within their range of vision but sky and water.

On the sixth night the second watch—from a little after midnight to dawn—fell to Harry. As it began to grow light, he almost feared to look toward the northwest, dreading the shock of a fresh disappointment.

There seemed to him to be something unusual in the atmosphere, that impeded, or rather confused and bewildered the sight; and when the sun rose he saw a high island covered with groves of tall palms, some two miles distant. The elevated shores and the green tops of the trees were plainly visible; but just at the point where land and water met, there was a kind of hazy indistinctness in the view. They were sailing directly from it, and Harry could not understand how they had passed so near as they must have done without seeing it.

All were at a loss to explain this wonder—for the island appeared to be in the course they had just sailed over.

They finally concluded that a strong current was bearing the boat backward in spite of the sail, and they lowered the sail.

Some little time passed, during which they appeared to be steadily drawing nearer to the land. The shore itself they could not see with perfect distinctness, a fine, golden haze waved and quivered before it, half veiling it from sight, and imparting to it an uncertain, though bright and dazzling aspect. But this appearance was confined to the lower part of the land. The bold cliffs and high groves were clearly defined.

"There's something very strange about all this," murmured Harry. "It has an unearthly look. I hope we're not the subjects of some fearful illusion."

Even as he spoke the bright haze which floated over the sea near the surface began to extend itself upward. The wooded shore became indistinct and dim, and seemed gradually receding in the distance, until the whole island, with its bold heights and waving groves, dissolved and melted away like a beautiful vision.

"Great heavens! what is this?" exclaimed Charley, in a voice of horror. "I should think the spirits of evil had power here, and were sporting with our misery."

"It is a mirage," said Frank, quietly, "as I suspected from the first. But, courage, boys! for although what we have seen was an optical illusion, there must be a real island not more than thirty miles off, of which this was the refracted image, and the current is sweeping us steadily toward it."

Hour after hour they drifted on, maintaining all the time a vigilant watch, lest by any possibility they should miss sight of the island which Frank was so confident they were approaching.

Presently they saw a flock of gannets, and then some other birds; the gannets passing so near that they could hear the motion of their wings. All were flying westward, and this confirmed Frank in his belief of the proximity of land.

"See," he exclaimed, "these reef birds are bound in the same direction with the others and ourselves; you may depend upon it, they are all hastening homeward to their nests on some not distant shore."

Some time now passed in almost perfect silence; but all at once, Tony, who was shading his eyes with his hand and looking intently westward, uttered a shout of joy.

"Land—O!" he cried. "Land! land!"

All hands at once turned their gaze toward the west, and beheld a snow-white line, and beyond this, too plainly relieved against the clear blue sky to admit of doubt or illusion, were the high outlines of a lovely island, clothed with verdure to its summit.

Meanwhile, the current continued to sweep them steadily onward toward the shore, the outlines of which became more and more distinct. At length the island was right before them, at the distance of hardly a mile.

Through a gap in the reef the shore of the island could be seen down to the water's edge.

Hastily pointing to the mast and gaff, which were lashed together, Frank told Arty to cling to them in case of accident. Then, calling to the rest to pull steadily, he steered directly for the inlet.

As they neared it the noise of the surf became almost deafening; the huge rollers, as they thundered against the perpendicular wall of coral, rising abruptly from the depths of the sea, sent up a column of foam and spray twelve or fifteen feet into the air.

When just within the entrance, the spectacle was grand and appalling. But the danger was soon over; with a firm hand and steady eye, Frank guided the boat along the narrow pass, and in a moment they had glided from the scene of fierce commotion without the reef, into one of perfect tranquillity and repose. A dozen strokes seemed to have placed them in a new world. Involuntarily they rested on their oars and gazed around them in silence.

A little later they landed on an islet just within the barrier, and here they passed the night.

The next morning, after making a hearty breakfast of coconuts and sea food, they crossed over to the main island, and began looking about them with no small degree of curiosity.

To their great astonishment, they found well-finished roads, and numerous canals cut through in all directions, and of sufficient depth to float a large boat or small vessel. These canals, as well as some of the roads, were walled up from fifteen to thirty feet high. They were skillfully built, and ranged from six to nine feet in thickness. They found what seemed to have been a grand temple, and the ruins of several other buildings, all of cut stone; and they noticed many large blocks, which would weigh several tons apiece, placed in the walls at a considerable height from the ground.

There was something very mysterious about these walls and canals, and deserted buildings—something very mysterious about the island itself—the boys soon began to think, and after a time they began to make their way toward a mountain-like elevation, about half a mile off, in order to get a better idea of what it really was.

They reached the foot of the mountain, and crowding their way

through the thick undergrowth that grew about its base, began ascending its rugged side

Suddenly Tony, who was some little distance ahead, with a startled cry, sank into the ground, and totally disappeared from sight.

"Great heavens! what does this mean?" exclaimed Frank, starting forward on a run.

"It's an enchanted isle!" muttered Harry, as he closely followed him.

They all reached the spot where Tony had disappeared, and soon heard him shouting for help, in a voice that came from beneath their feet, and which died away in sepulchral whispers, as if borne from the distant walls of some vast subterranean chamber.

His cries soon seemed like far-off yells of agony and horror; and yet, when they bent over the chasm through which he had fallen, they knew that he was almost close at hand.

Frank started up and looked about him.

At a short distance, one side of the lower part of the mountain seemed to have been split off, showing the bare granite-like face of the living rock.

"Follow me," he cried, and started for that particular spot, the others following close behind.

They reached it at a point about on a level with the floor of the cavern into which Tony had plunged.

Presently they came to a place where a broken mass of rocks seemed to have slid down from the heights above.

"If we can move these," said Frank, in a tone of conviction, "I am sure we can get at him," and he advanced to lay hold of the topmost stone.

But he started back with an exclamation of horror.

A human hand—the hand of a dead man—reaching out from the rocky wall, had struck him in the face.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RING OF MYSTERY—THE BOYS DECIDE UPON A FUTURE HOME.

Frank's horrified exclamation quickly attracted the attention of the others, when, catching sight of the sinister-looking object which had called it forth, they echoed his cry, and with rapid steps began retreating from the spot.

The dead hand was outstretched, as if vainly appealing for aid. The flesh had dried upon the bones, the skin being of a dark brown hue; but instinctively young Fleetwood knew it to be the hand of a white man.

Still, it was not the hand alone that riveted his attention, but something on one of the fingers—something that poured forth such a perfect flood of light as almost to dazzle his eyes; in short, a living fire.

He drew nearer and examined it closely.

The object was a rare and curious stone, the most peculiar and the most beautiful that he had ever seen in all his life; and it was so set in a ring as to represent the sun, the setting forming the rays.

The ring itself was composed of two scaly serpents, issuing in opposite directions from a human skull, and holding the sun's rays in their mouths. The eyes of these serpents were emeralds, and in the sockets of the skull were two rubies.

After a moment's hesitation Frank drew the ring from the unresisting finger and slipped it into his pocket; then he turned thoughtfully away.

At a little distance he found his friends in a high state of fear and excitement. Even Harry Halstead, usually calm and brave enough, exhibited signs of serious disquietude.

"What—what was it, Frank?" gasped Charley. "To think that

it had the power to thrust itself right through the solid rock and strike you so!"

"But I think you are mistaken, Charley," returned Frank, quietly. "The hand was there long before we visited the spot. It was there, no doubt, very soon after that mass of rocks fell and blocked up what I believe to have been the only entrance to the cavern, where poor Tony is now imprisoned."

"Ah!" exclaimed Harry, quickly, "you believe that the owner of that hand was in the cavern, and was just coming out when he was crushed to death?"

"Or," suggested Arty, "he might have been imprisoned by the falling mass, and, after waiting in vain to be delivered by his friends outside, tried to work his own way out, and died before he succeeded."

"Very likely, my little man," nodded Frank. "But come, we are neglecting Tony; let us return and do something for him at once."

And with one accord they hastened to the spot where he had disappeared from the surface of the earth.

They crowded around the opening, and Frank, stooping down, called out:

"Tony, old boy, are you there?"

"Ay, ay, cap'n, here I am, sure enough!" came back the answer.

"I suppose you can't reach my hand if I stretch it down to you?" asked Frank.

"'Fraid not, cap'n, but I'll try."

And he did his best to reach the outstretched hand, but without success.

"Let me see what I can do!" exclaimed Charley, crowding his way forward. "I believe I can get to him."

And he did with a vengeance, and carried two or three of his companions with him; for, in pressing too near the edge of the hole, the crumbling soil had given way, and they all went headlong into the cavern below, landing in a heap at Tony's feet.

Arty and Tuataga, the only ones left above, retired from the treacherous brink with all the promptness suitable to the occasion, leaving those below in undisputed possession of their new quarters.

The aperture was now of sufficient size to admit light and air, the blessings of which they stood most in need, and, after recovering a little from the rude shock they had received, they began to think of getting out.

"I say, Frank!" exclaimed Charley, "do you think we can climb out there?"

"You may try, all of you, if you like," was the reply; "but for my part, I should like to see something more of this strange place."

"This strange place!"

"Good heavens! did you hear that strange whisper mocking you?" asked Charley, with trembling lips.

"Yes, indeed; what a wonderful echo."

"An echo, eh? I never heard an echo anything like that before."

"Like that before!"

Charley began edging his way toward the opening.

"Oh, Frank!" he burst out suddenly, "you are not going to stay here, I hope? Come, let us dig out while we can."

"While we can!"

"You may all go," answered Frank in a low, calm tone; "but I tell you, for our future good, I am going to have a look about me. Pray what would you call that thing over in the corner there?"

He pointed to a large square object in a sort of recess of the immense cavern.

"It's a chest," he said, after drawing a little nearer—"a sea-man's chest; most likely that of an officer of some ship."

"By Jove!" muttered Harry, "I hope it isn't a coffin."

"No—no, it's just what I said it was, an officer's chest—see; and there are barrels, casks, boxes and packages!"

In the meantime Arty and Tuataga had found that they could easily clamber down into the cavern, and they soon joined the other boys within.

"My idea is this," said Frank, as the boys grouped themselves about him. "If we decide to make this cavern our future home and stronghold, as no doubt we shall, then the entrance should be concealed as carefully as possible, and so thoroughly protected by barriers that the place can be successfully defended. We can blast open an entrance here with gunpowder. I'm sure there's plenty of it in those casks. We can't fall into the cave every time we want to come in."

"But what kind of barriers would you raise about your new entrance?" asked Harry.

"I think I can answer that question easy enough. Follow me."

With a great deal of trouble they clambered out.

And he led them around a wide semicircle that inclosed the portion of the perpendicular wall in which the obstructed entrance was situated.

He pointed out, and they readily traced along the ground, the partly decayed and partly sprouting remains of a palisade or stockade fence, overgrown with the luxuriant vegetation of the spot, and interlaced with shoots from the adjoining thicket.

In one place they found abundant evidence of a kitchen garden, and further on—beyond the line of the palisade, in fact—an open space that might have been called the farm or plantation.

They explored the spot with all the diligence and animation of young minds bent on discovery, and lured forward by a thousand beckoning hopes. They gathered fruit and jams, taro and plantains, and a little later made a hearty meal, which all greatly enjoyed.

On one side, and just within the inclosure, was a stream of pure water, issuing from a crevice in the mountainside, so that, as Tony said, if they settled there, they could have all the necessities of life close at hand.

After much talking and due consideration, it was unanimously agreed, not only to make the spot their home, but to begin without unnecessary delay to restore its defenses.

But to do this they must have tools—axes, hatchets, hammers, spades and crowbars, and they must also have plenty of spikes and nails.

On the morning of the next day Frank and Tony entered the cavern together through the hole in the roof, and began searching for the gunpowder.

They found it, and to their great delight and wonder, found several prepared blasting cartridges, and with these valuable but dangerous goods they reascended to the outer world.

With the utmost care and nicety one of the cartridges was fixed just underneath one of the largest blocks, and then exploded.

The block, and those around it, were shattered into a thousand pieces. These, as rapidly as possible, were removed and thrown into the neighboring chasm, and the entrance was cleared, and all that was found of the owner of the dead hand was buried out of sight nearby. Then, all together, the six boys entered the cavern.

There was light enough within now; for not only was the newly-cleared entrance wide and high, but the hole in the roof was considerably enlarged, the remainder of the loose earth having fallen in, and the sun's rays thereby finding easy access to the otherwise gloomy interior.

As soon as the boys had become a little accustomed to the place they looked eagerly about them, and were utterly astonished at what they beheld; indeed, the sight was more extraordinary than anything they could have conceived of in a dream. The cavern was nothing short of a colossal storehouse, filled with every article that could be thought of for the use of a far-distant and isolated settlement. Bales upon bales, barrels upon barrels, chests upon chests, arms of every description and in abundance, agricultural implements, machinery, marine stores of all kinds, and materials for shipbuilding, tools and iron, spikes, nails, knives, domestic and culinary implements—ay, and trinkets, clothing and cloth, shoes and leather, books, writing materials, nautical instruments, medicine chests. In fact, here seemed to be deposited many large shiploads of goods, intended for some great and important enterprise—scarcely that of occupying a small, romantic island in the midst of the Pacific Ocean.

The silence, the gloom, ending in blackest darkness of the remote chambers of the cavern, the dusty mold that thickly invested the boxes and chests, and the damp, earthly odor of the place fairly chilled their blood, and fixed them like statues to the spot.

They spoke but in whispers; for, if a word was uttered aloud, a responsive word was returned, which again and again reverberated, and at last died in hollow echoes.

They were more than half inclined to retreat, as at first, and leave everything as they had found it; and more than one pair of anxious eyes were turned longingly toward the newly-opened entrance.

The young leader saw the state of things about him, and suddenly exclaimed:

"See here, boys, no nonsense. Just give me your attention for a moment."

They turned quickly, and saw that his eyes were riveted on a particular chest in front of him—the one that had attracted his notice three days before, and which he had said was an officer's chest.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VALLEY OF DELIGHTS—A MYSTERIOUS VOICE.

Advancing to the chest, Frank tried to raise the lid.

It was closed fast, but the dust and mold that covered it came off plentifully on his hands.

Nearby stood a tall cask, on the top of which lay several tools. Frank seized a heavy hammer and thundered on the chest with all his might, but in vain.

Tony moved forward to assist him, but stumbling over a small box, it fell apart, and a lot of spermaceti candles went rolling about the cavern floor.

"Hello!" exclaimed Tony, grabbing half a dozen of the candles, and picking himself up, "here's a chance for an illumination. Let's see what's in yonder right away. What d'ye say, boys?"

They had matches and other means of striking a light, so that soon several of the candles were burning; and thoroughly armed, and with Frank at their head, they moved forward through the winding passage before them toward the part from whence the echoes came.

As they went on, the cavern increased rapidly in width and altitude, and the walls and roof appeared everywhere garnished with resplendent spars.

They had now entered a great chamber; but scarcely had they taken a dozen steps forward, when a scene suddenly burst upon them that fixed them motionless with amazement.

As their voices had been multiplied before, so now their lights

were answered by ten thousand starry beams, glancing from afar, and from on high, in a vast cavity of the mountain, whose limits were totally invisible to their eyes; for the space between the radiant points of light was darker than night itself.

Never were candles more effective or more needful. Three steps further, and the rocky floor would have failed them, and they must have plunged headlong to an abyss, of whose profound depths they could form no idea until they cast in a fragment of the rock.

They could not hold their breath during the time that the piece of stone was silently descending. At length they heard it strike the rock, and, after a long interval, a distant splashing sound announced the water that received it.

They sent in another splinter of the rock, and, while they again held their breath in silence for the result, sounds of another kind murmured around the abyss, and were returned in faint whispers by the unseen boundaries of the cavern.

One or two candles were dropped in by the startled boys, and these, descending to the depths beneath, retained their sparks until they diminished to the tiniest stars of light, when they became extinguished in the subterranean water.

The sounds they had heard appeared to be those of human voices, although the probabilities of such a circumstance as the presence of human beings in that particular spot seemed small indeed.

They did not wait for a second proof of the matter, however, but scrambled back with all the speed at their command, receiving several falls, cuts and bruises by the way. Even Frank and Tony were affected by the panic, and hastened after their companions, though at a less rapid rate.

On reaching the outer cavern, Charley suggested that the sounds they had heard were the voices of the persons whose stores they had broken in upon, or that some, at least, of the party were living, and might reclaim their goods and punish the plunderers.

Harry thought there might be something in this, and proposed that they go outside and consider the matter.

The others assenting, they adjourned to the cleared space in front of the entrance, and throwing themselves upon the ground, in the shade of a spreading palm, and near the banks of a little stream, discussed the affair of the cavern until one or two, at least, were wearied of the subject, and all began to think they were mistaken in the facts.

On hearing this acknowledgment from the others, Tony promptly proposed that they should return at once to the cave; but Charley, Arty, and even Tuataga, who was somewhat inclined to be superstitious, held back.

But curiosity and necessity together overcame all objections, and also fears, even in the most timid; and an hour or more having passed without hearing or seeing an individual but themselves, they resolved on a new invasion of the cavern, and rising to their feet they went in together.

Regardless of echoes now, they made the abyss resound with their attacks upon the chests and tubs, crates and cases of iron goods and useful wares.

There were rifles, guns, and pistols, fowling-pieces, revolvers, and great cases of ammunition, with which the little party could have waked the caverns of the mountain to its very center, and had stunned their own senses till they swooned, but these they wisely let alone for the time being.

When they were surrounded, nearly up to their necks, by the unpacked goods, the question arose as to what they should do with the mighty mass of stores, and how they should stow and arrange them for the future.

They had fairly blocked themselves in, and had darkened the rocky chamber with the great pile they had heaped at its entrance.

Many wise projects, and places of stowage and removal, were proposed; but Frank Fleetwood, as usual, hit the difficulty exactly by suggesting, in his quiet way, that they should repack all again as they had found them, and merely take what they wanted, when they wanted it, returning all implements to their place in the cave when done with.

Matters being thus rearranged, they contented themselves with taking that for which they had an immediate use, and no more.

Armed, then, with tools of every kind, the work on the palisade was commenced at once, and kept up steadily until about half-past five o'clock, when Harry, who had dropped his spade some little while before and gone off by himself, returned, and begged them all to accompany him, if they wanted to see the real Valley of Delights.

The boys at once assented, and as they approached the entrance to the valley, Harry warned them to prepare themselves for the most charming spectacle they had ever beheld.

He walked on before with the air of a professional guide, and stood waiting and beckoning for them at the border of a grove.

On joining him they found that he had scarcely exaggerated in his description of the spot.

They stood at the top of a smooth and gradual descent. Before them lay a secluded valley, from which the land arose on every side to about the elevation of the grove behind them. In some places it ascended in gentle slopes, in others by abrupt acclivities.

In the bosom of the valley spread a little lake of oval form, fringed in some places with shrubbery, while in others groups of casuarinas extended their long, drooping boughs in graceful arches over the water.

After pausing a moment the boys descended to the margin of the lake, which was so limpid that they could distinguish every pebble at the bottom.

At the upper end, and near the point at which they had come out of the grove, a small stream precipitated itself some eighteen feet down a rocky declivity and fell into a circular basin a few yards in diameter. Overflowing this basin, it found its way into the lake by another descent of a few feet.

Around the basin, and on both sides of the waterfall, were several curious columns of basalt and irregular, picturesque piles of basaltic ruins. Suddenly a soft voice fell on their ears.

All started in astonishment. "Off with their heads!" cried the voice. "Off with their heads!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COTTAGE—THE INCLOSURE—AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

"What had we better do?" asked Charley Curtiss, with trembling voice and pallid lips, while he drew closer to Frank and Tony.

"Cut sticks! cut sticks!" cried the mysterious voice, "and be quick about it, too."

"He's ordering us away from here," said Arty. "I suppose we are trespassing on his grounds. Hadn't we better go?"

"Yes, yes! Fly—fly for your lives!"

Charley and Tuataga started off at once, and Arty was about to follow them, when Harry burst into a fit of laughter that almost caused him to fall to the ground.

Frank, who had been closely watching his cousin, now followed the direction of his eyes, and suddenly espied a large parrot perched upon a branch of an anume tree directly over their

heads, from which he eyed them with a disdainful and truculent air.

"There, at last, is the dread enemy who has frightened us so much," said Harry. "I honestly expect he will come down and scrape our acquaintance presently. He might give us some valuable information if he only would."

"Come out of the woods! come out of the woods!" screamed the parrot.

"There's the advice you were looking for," laughed Frank, "and I shouldn't wonder if it would be a good plan to follow it."

"Look out for squalls ahead! Ha, ha! look out for squalls!" yelled the parrot, and apparently satisfied with this display of his accomplishments, he spread his wings and flew heavily across the beautiful lake, alighting not far from the shore, where they could hear him occasionally uttering a shrill cry or a still shriller laugh.

By this time the runaways had returned, and all the boys were together again.

"Do you see where the parrot is now?" Tony presently inquired of Frank.

"Yes, I see his green and yellow feathers among the foliage, but not very distinctly."

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," Tony went on, "there is a house or building of some kind just beyond the woods on the other side of the lake where he has alighted."

On shifting their ground a little, they could all perceive between the boughs of the trees, something that did in fact look like a low wooden dwelling, and after a moment's consultation, it was agreed that Frank and Tony should cross the stream—which could easily be done just above the point where it poured into the lake—and reconnoiter, while the rest awaited their report.

By leaping from stone to stone, and wading occasionally for short distances, they picked their way to the other side, and presently disappeared among the thick undergrowth.

In about twenty minutes they returned to the shore and called for the others to come over, saying that they had discovered quite a house, which appeared, however, to have been long deserted. Harry took Arty upon his back, and they forded the rapids as the others had done.

Following Frank and Tony, they soon passed through the woods and reached quite an open space, about halfway between the lake and the top of the ascent, in the midst of which was a fair-sized, one-story dwelling, surrounded by a rude fence of pointed stakes.

Entering through a gate, hung upon large door hinges, they found themselves directly in front of the house. It appeared, for the most part, to be built of timber which had once composed the sides and interior of a ship, and was put together with consummate skill.

The front yard, and what had been the garden, was full of rank weeds, and damp masses of lichen and moss hung from the eaves of the house and covered its roof.

The door, which was furnished with a heavy lock and brass knob, was closed, but not fastened. After a moment's hesitation, they opened it and entered a large square room, lighted by four windows, which had evidently been taken from the upper parts of sash doors.

These windows were well put into the sides of the house, and from the appearance of all the work, both within and without, Frank declared that it had been done by persons accustomed to that kind of labor—in other words, ship carpenters.

A large table, made of a peculiar kind of wood, which Frank said was called *toi* in the Samoan group, and three or four chairs without backs, composed nearly all the furniture of this apart-

ment. A rude shelf was fastened against the wall between two of the windows, upon which a number of earthenware dishes were arranged. A somewhat smaller apartment was partitioned off with rough boards from the first, with which it communicated by a single doorway, to which a ship's cabin door had been fitted.

In this second room were several low bedsteads, ranged side by side, and a large oak chest, bound with brass. In one corner stood a small square writing table of some dark-colored wood, with several drawers.

In another corner Harry discovered a rusty gridiron and saucepan, a small iron pot, and a toasting-fork, upon which he pounced with the eagerness of a miser lighting upon hidden treasures, for nothing quite like them had been found in the cavern.

The chest was nearly empty, but a small box, fixed in one end of it, contained a number of bottles, vials and drugs; in fact, was a perfect little medicine chest. And although they had found a larger and more complete assortment, Frank suggested that it would be well to take the best of care of the new "find," and to this all readily agreed.

They remained at the Cottage, as Charley christened the place, for some little time longer; but the spot had a gloomy and deserted air, and they unanimously agreed that it was not nearly as pleasant as the one they had selected in front of the entrance to the great cavern.

To this, then, they now returned, and shortly afterward paid a visit to the boat, when, having disposed of a hearty supper, they retired to their old camping-ground, under the low-spreading tree, to pass the night.

The next morning, by Frank's advice, they went at the work they had laid out for themselves with the determination to push it to completion as rapidly as possible.

They built a comfortable house, closed up the aperture into which they had fallen and built a strong palisade, training vines so that they would grow over it and cover it.

It was the third day after all their labors were completed, and even a garden had been furnished with plants, and sowed with seed, and while Frank was seated just within the eaves of the new dwelling, preparing some fish-tackle for immediate use, that Tony came rushing through the open gateway, and seizing him by the arm, almost dragged him outside.

"What is it, boy? What's the matter with you?" asked Frank in astonishment, as soon as he could catch his breath.

"Matter? Matter enough," exclaimed Tony; "there's a ship just beyond the smaller island, and just within the coral reef. Come up and see it for yourself."

"Ah, it has come at last!" murmured Frank, with a troubled look, as he began climbing the sides of the mountain, "and I really do not know whether I ought to be glad or sorry. Well," he continued, as they drew near their destination, "we shall soon see."

"What do you make of her?" asked Tony, after they had reached the point designated "The Lookout," and Frank had taken a long look at the stranger beyond the smaller island.

"I don't know what to make of her," replied Frank, slowly; "but judging from certain signs, there must be some one aboard who is pretty familiar with this island and its surroundings."

"There's where I agree with you, cap'n," exclaimed Tony, emphatically.

"And therefore," continued Frank, "we must use the utmost caution. We must not let them see us, or even suspect that we are on the island, if we can help it, until after we have learned their true character."

"And how are we to do that?"

"Doubtless they will first land on the smaller island for fresh

water, if for nothing else; and if they do, one of us must go there and try to get near enough to listen to their conversation. From that their true character can easily be determined."

"I'll be the one to go," said Tony, promptly.

"Well, we'll see about that later. Now we must go down and get the boys together and tell them of this unexpected visitor."

It did not take long to descend the mountainside, and when they had reached the inclosure they found all assembled there.

The news Tony and Frank had to tell produced a profound sensation. All insisted upon going in the boat to the smaller island, so that in case the people of the ship proved friendly and willing to take them away, they need not run the risk of being left behind. And as Frank knew a secluded spot on the lesser island, where the boat and all hands would be safe from observation, he consented, and they prepared to set out at once.

Each one was armed with a rifle, a revolver and a keen-edged knife, and taking the shortest cut, they hastened to the canal where their boat was moored. A quarter of an hour later they had landed on the smaller island in the secluded spot discovered by Frank.

It was soon learned that two boats had left the ship, and landed at a point about a quarter of a mile below them, in a little cove.

Tony had discovered this, and also that they were going to a spring at some distance from the cove for water.

Having communicated these facts to his companions, he hurried away again, in order to reach the spring before the strangers, and so take up a good point for observation at his leisure.

More than half an hour passed, and the waiting boys, who had thrown themselves upon the ground at the head of the narrow inlet in which their boat was sheltered, were growing impatient.

Frank was particularly restless, and was just saying for the twentieth time, "I don't see what keeps him," when Harry sprang to his feet with the exclamation:

"Hark, there goes a rifle shot," and before he had finished speaking, another and another rang out in quick succession, the sound coming, apparently, from the dense woods in the direction of the spring.

"Can that be Tony, I wonder?" said Frank, anxiously. "If so, I am very much afraid he has got into serious trouble."

At these words every boy was on his feet with his rifle clutched fiercely in his hands.

"Come!" exclaimed Frank, and they started for the woods together on a dead run.

The next moment they were startled by a quick, fierce shout, followed immediately by a long piercing and blood-curdling cry proceeding from the same quarter from which the reports of firearms had been heard, and before they had time to conjecture the cause or meaning of these frightful sounds, Tony bounded like a deer from the woods, about a hundred yards from the spot where they were about to enter them, and running swiftly toward them, cried out excitedly:

"Back to the boat! for your lives, back to the boat!"

Frank seized Arty by one hand, and motioned to Harry to take the other, which he did, and without stopping to demand any explanations, they started at a rapid pace in the direction of the boat, Charley taking the lead.

It took but a minute or so to enable them to reach the spot where the boat lay, now high and dry upon the shore.

"Come," exclaimed Tony, seizing hold of the gunwale, "let us get it into the water at once. The tide is out and the boat is heavy. It ought not to have been allowed to ground. We shall want all the strength we can muster to move it, and want it badly, too."

By a united effort they got the boat to the edge of the water.

Tony lifted Arty into the boat, and asked the rest to get in, excepting Frank, saying that they two would push her into the deep water of the inlet.

"Hold!" cried Harry, "let us not be too fast; there may be some unfortunates that need our assistance, and they will most likely run this way. We must not leave them to be murdered."

"There are no unfortunates alive now," answered Tony, "and there is no time to be lost; the men have killed their officers—every one that came ashore with them, and a passenger, too, I fear; and they will take the ship and commit more murders, unless we can get there before them to warn those on board."

This was more horrible than anything they had anticipated, but they had no time to dwell upon it; the sound of oars rattling in the rowlocks was heard from the direction of the little cove.

"Hark! there are the mutineers!" cried Tony; "but I think that we have the advantage of them. They must pull around yonder point, which will make at least a quarter of a mile's difference in the distance to the ship, as she lies off this end of the island."

"Pshaw! there is no use trying to get to the ship before them," said Harry; "their two boats pull eight oars each, and there are men enough to fill them; you told us so yourself, you know."

"Let us try it," said Frank, glancing rapidly from the two boats, now visible, to the ship; "if we fail, no harm is done, except that we incur the anger of the mutineers. I, for one, am willing to take the risk."

"Yes," exclaimed Tony, "and we ought all to be, though that bloody scoundrel, Miguel Gonzalo, is among them."

"Miguel Gonzalo," faltered Charley, and instantly his cheeks blanched.

"Yes, Miguel Gonzalo; and if I get another chance at him this day he will never trouble any one again."

Frank and Tony now pushed the boat into deep water, and sprang in.

At Frank's request, Tuataga took the helm, he and Tony seized the two remaining oars, and the four commenced pulling with a degree of coolness and vigor that would not have disgraced older and more practiced oarsmen. It soon became evident from the way they bent to their work, that their chance of reaching the ship before the mutineers was by no means desperate.

All at once the crew of the leading boat of the mutineers seemed to observe them. They had cleared the point to the northward, and the boys were, perhaps, eighty yards nearer the long point, beyond which they could see the masts of the ship, and on doubling which they would be almost within hail of her.

The latter point was probably almost half a mile distant from them, and toward the head of it all three boats were steering.

In the first of the mutineers' boats Miguel Gonzalo was at the helm. As soon as he observed the boys, he appeared to speak to the crew of his boat, and they commenced pulling with greater vigor than before. He then hailed them:

"Hello, lads! your friends are yonder. Are you going to leave them on the island?"

They pulled on in silence.

"The ship yonder picked up the captain's boat, and took me from that island afterward. I told Captain Fleetwood that I thought you were here, so he and the others went ashore with us just now. They're looking for you, you'd better pull back and find them."

"All a trick," said Tony; "don't waste any breath with them;" and they bent to the oars with new energy.

"The young scamps mean to give the alarm," they could hear Gonzalo mutter with an oath, as he surveyed, for a moment, the interval between the boats, and then the distance to the point.

"There's no use mincing matters, my lads," he suddenly cried, standing up in the stern; "we have knocked three or four on the head, and served some others who didn't approve of the proceeding in the same way, and now we're going to take the ship."

"We know it, and intend to prevent you," cried Tony, panting with the violence of his exertions.

"Unship your oars till we pass you, and you shall not be hurt," pursued Gonzalo in the same breath; "pull another stroke, and I will serve you as I have a certain friend of yours, and he lies at the spring with his throat slit."

Could this be true—and if so, who was that friend?

Tony was inclined to believe that it was true, and he more than half suspected who the friend might be, but never a word did he say to his companions, who pulled steadily onward with blanched faces, but firmly compressed lips.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIGHT ON THE SHIP.

The boys were now close upon the point, and as Frank glanced from their pursuers to the ship, he began to breathe more freely. They had gained upon them; but it was inch by inch, and the goal was now at hand. The boats of the mutineers, though pulling eight oars each, were far clumsier than that of the boys, and were more heavily loaded. They had almost held their own with them thus far.

But now Gonzalo sprang up once more in the bow of the foremost boat, and raised a rifle to his shoulder.

A puff of smoke arose from the muzzle of the piece, and just as the sharp report reached their ears, Harry uttered a quick exclamation of pain, and let fall his oar.

For a moment all was confusion and alarm; but Harry, who had seized his oar again almost instantly, declared that he was not hurt; that the bullet had merely grazed his shoulder—and he attempted to recommence rowing. Before, however, he had pulled half a dozen strokes his right hand was covered with blood that streamed down from his arm.

Tuataga now insisted on taking his oar, and Harry took the young islander's place at the helm.

While this change was being effected, the mutineers gained upon them perceptibly. Every moment was precious. Gonzalo urged his men to greater efforts. The turning point of the struggle was now at hand, and the excitement became terrible.

"Steer close in, it will save something in distance," gasped Tony, almost choking for breath.

"Not too closely," warned Frank. "Don't get us aground."

"There's no danger of that," answered Tony. "It's deep off the point."

Almost as he spoke a sharp, grating sound was heard beneath the bottom of the boat, and their progress was arrested with a suddenness that threw Charley and Tuataga from their seats.

A shout of mingled exultation and derision, as they witnessed this disaster, greeted them from the other boats, which were plowing through the water but a little way behind them, and some twenty yards further out from the shore.

"It's all up," said Tony, bitterly, dropping his oar.

"Back water! Her stern still swings free," cried Frank. "The next swell will lift her clear."

They got as far aft as possible to lighten the bows, and now the other boats swept past.

Gonzalo probably deemed himself secure of a more convenient opportunity at no distant period, to wreck vengeance upon them. At any rate there was no time for it now, and he merely menaced them with his clinched fist, as he left them behind.

Almost at the same moment a great sea came rolling in, and as their oars dipped to back water, they floated clear, then a few vigorous strokes carried them to a safe distance from the treacherous shoal.

"One more effort!" cried Frank, as the mutineers disappeared around the point. "We're not too late to give them a warning, though it will be but a short one."

Again they bent to their oars, and in a moment had doubled the point, and were in the wake of the other boats. The ship lay directly before them, and within long hailing distance.

"Now, boys, let us shout together, and make them understand their danger," said Tony.

"A dozen strokes more," said Frank, "and we can do it with more certainty."

Gonzalo merely glanced back at them as he heard the dip of their oars; but he took no further notice of them; the crisis was too close at hand.

On board the ship all seemed quiet. Some of the men were gathered together on the starboard bow, but they did not seem to notice the approach of the boats.

"Now, then!" cried Frank, at length starting to his feet, "one united effort to attract their attention—all together, now!"

And they sent up a cry that echoed wildly across the water, and startled the idlers at the bows, who came running to the nearer side of the ship.

"We have their attention, now hail them," said Frank to his cousin, who had a powerful voice. "You know what to say."

Harry put his hand to his mouth, and in tones that could be heard twice the distance, shouted:

"Look out for those boats—don't let them board you—the men have killed your officers, and want to take the ship!"

From the stir and confusion that followed, it was clear that the warning was understood.

But the scoundrels were now scarcely a dozen yards from the vessel, toward which they were rushing with unabated speed. The next moment they were under her bows; just as their oars flew into the air, the boys heard a deep voice from the deck sternly ordering them to keep off, and were satisfied that it was the captain.

The villains gave no heed to the order; several of them sprang into the chains, Gonzalo among the rest.

A fierce, though unequal struggle at once commenced. The captain, armed with a weapon which he wielded with both hands, struck right and left among the boarders as they attempted to gain the deck, and two, at least, of them fell back with heavy plunges into the water.

But the captain seemed almost unsupported, and the mutineers had nearly all reached the deck, and were pressing upon him.

"Oh, but this is a cruel sight," said Harry, turning away with a shudder. "Boys, can we do nothing more?"

Tony, who had been groping in the bottom of the boat, now drew forth his rifle.

"Yes, we can," he said, and raising it to his shoulder, he fired.

Gonzalo dropped out of sight upon the deck.

"We have arms in plenty," said Tony as he lowered his piece; "the arch-fiend is now out of the fight; we are not such boys but that we can take a part in what is going on—let us pull for the ship!"

"Yes—yes!" echoed the others, "let us pull for the ship."

CHAPTER X.

TONY AND THE BOYS MAKE SOME GOOD SHOTS.

The boat had hardly received the first impulse from this new resolve, when the report of firearms was heard.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tony Bright, as he started to his feet, "the captain's down, and that fiend, Gonzalo, that I killed a moment ago, has shot him!"

"Gonzalo must be a cat," muttered Charley; "for he seems to have as many as nine lives."

"It looks like it, anyway," acquiesced Tony; "for although I tumbled him over with a piece of lead just now, he's alive again, as you can see for yourself, and the captain has disappeared."

All gazed eagerly toward the ship, and the figure which they had taken for that of the captain was no longer to be distinguished among the combatants.

Some person was now dragged to the side of the ship toward them, and thrown overboard; he sank after a feeble struggle; a triumphant shout followed, and then two men were seen running up the rigging.

"There go two poor fellows up to the foretop!" exclaimed Harry, pointing to the figures in the rigging; "they can only gain time at the best; but it can't be that the mutineers will kill them in cold blood."

"Gonzalo is just the man to do it," answered Tony, emphatically. "Those two fellows have stood by their captain, and that will seal their fate. Look! it is as I said."

And all could see some one pointing what appeared to be a musket at one of the figures in the foretop.

A parley seemed to follow, as the result of which, the nearer fugitive came down and surrendered himself. The other, for the time being, appeared to pass unnoticed.

So rapid had events passed thus far, and so stunning was their effect, that it was some moments before the boys could collect their thoughts, or fully realize the desperate situation; and they sat silent and bewildered, gazing toward the ship.

Harry was the first to break silence.

"And now what's to be done?" he asked. "As to going any nearer, that, it seems to me, under the circumstances, is out of the question. The ship is now in the hands of the mutineers."

"I don't know what we can do," said Charley, "except to pull ashore and conceal ourselves, and so stand some chance of escaping the vengeance of the rascals."

"There's one thing we can do!" exclaimed Tony, in a decided tone. "There are no better weapons in the world than these rifles, and I think we can make one or two of those bloody scoundrels understand that we know how to use them."

"There!" he quickly added, as he brought his Winchester to his shoulder, "see that villain running up the ratlines with his knife between his teeth. He wants to cut the throat of the poor devil in the foretop. Now, that's wrong, is it not?"

"Of course," muttered Charley, mechanically.

"Well, then, here goes to prevent the wrong."

Crack!

The boys eagerly watched the result of the shot.

First they saw the knife drop from the mutineer's mouth, then loosening his hold on the ratlines, they saw the man fall backward, and after striking on the top of the gunwale, rebound, and fall into the sea, where he quickly disappeared from sight.

"Oh, Tony, that was awful!" gasped Arty, in an awe-struck tone.

"Yes," assented the young sailor, "I agree with you, Arty; but wasn't it better that such a bad man should die, rather than that

he should be permitted to kill the poor innocent fellow up there in the foretop?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so; but the poor fellow will be killed, anyhow. See! there are two going up after him now."

"Ah! I see," and again Tony's rifle rang out.

But there was a double report, and both of the men Arty had pointed out came tumbling from the rigging to the deck.

Tony looked around, and saw that the other shot had been fired by Frank.

"That's the talk, old boy," he exclaimed, approvingly. "We may not be able to wholly wipe out the rascals, but I reckon we can thin their ranks a little."

"Look out!" cried Harry, warningly, and almost before the words were out of his mouth a volley of musketry was fired from the ship.

The bullets pattered like hail on the surface of the water, but every one fell short. The boys had the advantage of the mutineers in being armed with improved Winchesters.

Tony sent up a yell of derision, and turning eagerly to his companions exclaimed:

"Now, then, boys, let's show them what we can do. Tuataga, you've got the hang of your rifle by this time, and ought to be able to answer for one of the lubbers, at least."

The young islander nodded, and quietly intimated that he proposed to do his duty.

"Well, then," said Tony, "are you all ready?"

"All ready," was the reply; and every boy but Arty brought a rifle to his shoulder.

The mutineers, who now had full control of the vessel's deck, were watching the boat with careless indifference.

"The fools!" muttered Tony; "they don't seem to have found out yet that we mean business. Let 'em have it!" and five rifle-shots rang out.

In an instant all was confusion on board the ship; and it was soon evident that no less than four of the villains were either killed or wounded.

Then something like order seemed to grow out of the tumult, and a dozen or so of the men began tumbling over the side of the vessel into the boats, while the others rapidly supplied them with arms.

"What does that mean?" asked Charley, anxiously.

"It means that they propose to fight us at close quarters, and punish us for the losses we have inflicted upon them," was Frank's quiet reply.

"Then it will be all day with us in a little less than no time," almost groaned Charley.

"Not if we can kill them off before they can get within musket range," said Tony; "and it seems to me now is a good time to begin that business."

"But here is something better than that," cried Harry, eagerly, pointing out to sea; and looking in the direction indicated, they saw a large ship, with all her sails set, steering directly for them, or so nearly so, as to make it apparent that, if she held on her present course, she must pass very near them.

Had they not been entirely engrossed by what was taking place immediately around them, they could not have failed to have seen her sooner, as she must have been in sight a considerable time.

"Ah! they see her on board now," exclaimed Tony, suddenly, "and are calling back the boats."

"Yes," added Frank, "and are getting up anchor and seem in a great hurry to be off. Evidently they don't feel like being neighborly just now with strange vessels."

In fact, there was every indication on board the nearest ship of haste and eagerness to be gone.

The men in the boats were soon on board again, and the boats themselves were hoisted to the davits. Then, while some of the men were at the capstan getting up the anchor, others were busy in the rigging, and sail after sail was rapidly spread to the breeze, so that by the time the anchor was at the bows, the ship began to move slowly through the water.

"It is rapidly getting dark," said Charley, "and I think we had better put up the sail and steer for the stranger."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Tony; "how the time has passed."

"Yes," said Frank; "and Charley is right, we must make for the stranger at once, for she may possibly tack before she sees us."

Frank and Tony proceeded to step the mast and rig the sail. Meantime, Tuataga got Harry's coat off, and examined and bandaged the wound in his shoulder, which had been bleeding profusely; he pronounced it to be but a trifling hurt.

A breeze from the southeast had sprung up at sunset, and they now had a free wind to fill their sail, as they steered directly out to sea to meet the stranger, which was still at too great a distance to make it probable that they had been seen by her people.

It was with feelings of anxiety and uneasiness that they saw the faint twilight fading away with the suddenness usual in tropical latitudes, and the darkness gathering rapidly around them.

Already the east was wrapped in gloom, and only a faint streak of light along the western horizon marked the spot where the sun had so recently disappeared.

"How suddenly the night has come upon us," said Frank, who had been peering through the dusk toward the approaching vessel, in anxious silence. "Oh, for fifteen minutes more of daylight! I am afraid she is about to tack."

This announcement filled all with dismay, and every eye was strained toward her with intense and painful interest.

"Pick up your rifles!" exclaimed Tony, suddenly, "we must fire a volley. If we can't attract her attention in that way, there's no help for us."

"I believe you're right, Tony," nodded Frank, approvingly. "Let us all fire together. Now, then—ready! fire!" and the five rifle shots rang out as one.

Then again they peered through the growing darkness toward the distant vessel.

"What do you think, Frank; does she show any signs of having heard our signal?" asked Charley, anxiously.

"I can't say that she does," was the reluctant reply; "but it's too soon to say for certain. We must wait a little."

"Yes; and wait in vain," groaned young Curtiss.

CHAPTER XI.

LOST ON THE OPEN OCEAN—THE CANNIBAL ISLAND.

Meanwhile, the breeze had freshened somewhat, and the boys had rather more of it than they desired, as their boat was, after all, but poorly fitted to navigate the open ocean in rough weather.

Arty began to manifest some alarm, as they were tossed like a chip from wave to wave, and occasionally deluged with spray by a sea bursting with a rude shock over their bow; and, as the wind continued to rise, all experienced a sense of insecurity and a feeling of helplessness such as they had hardly known before. Soon, as they sank into the trough of the sea, their horizon was contracted to the breadth of less than half a dozen yards, and they entirely lost sight of land and of both ships.

But it was evident that they were moving through the water with considerable velocity, and there was encouragement in that, for they felt confident that if the stranger should hold on her

present course but a little longer, they should be on board of her before their safety would be seriously endangered by the increasing breeze.

If, however, she were really tacking, their situation would indeed be critical; this all saw, and fully understood.

A very few moments put an end to their suspense, by confirming Frank's opinion and their worst fears; the stranger had altered her course; her yards were braced around, and she was standing further out to sea.

Still, however, there would have been a possibility of reaching her but for the failure of light, for she had not so far changed her course but that she would have to pass a point which the boys could probably gain before her.

But now it was with difficulty, and only by means of the cloud of canvas she carried, that they could distinguish her through the momentarily deepening gloom; and with sinking hearts, after another ineffectual volley, they relinquished the last hope connected with her.

Soon she entirely vanished from their sight, and when they gazed anxiously around the narrow horizon that now bounded their vision, they could nowhere distinguish the land.

But then, even in open day, the distance of a few miles would be sufficient to sink the low shores of the island; and now the night had so suddenly overtaken them, it might be quite near, without their being able to distinguish it.

They were even uncertain and divided in opinion as to the direction in which it lay—so completely were they bewildered.

The night was one of deep and utter gloom. There was no moon, and not a single star shed its feeble light over the wilderness of agitated waters upon which their frail boat was tossing.

Heavy, low-hanging clouds covered the sky, but soon even these could no longer be distinguished; a cold, damp mist, dense and almost palpable to the touch, crept over the ocean, and enveloped them so closely that it was impossible to see clearly from one end of the boat to the other.

The wind, however, instead of freshening, as they had feared, died gradually away. For this they had reason to be thankful; for though their situation that night seemed dismal enough, yet how much more fearful would it have been if the rage of the elements, and danger of immediate destruction had been added to the other circumstances of terror by which they were surrounded.

As it was, however, the sea having gone down, they supposed themselves to be in no great or pressing peril. Though miserably uncomfortable, and somewhat agitated and anxious, they yet confidently expected that the light of morning would show them the land again.

The terrible and exciting scenes through which they had so recently passed had completely exhausted them, and they were too much overwhelmed by the suddenness of their calamity, and the novel situation in which they found themselves, to be greatly disposed to talk. Arty, with many a weary sigh, at length fell asleep with his head on young Fleetwood's breast, and even Tony's usual spirits seemed now to have quite forsaken him.

After the mast had been unstepped, and such preparations as their circumstances permitted were made for passing the night comfortably, Tony related all that he knew of what had taken place on shore, previous to the alarm which he had given.

The account made Frank very grave and thoughtful indeed, and he was more anxious than ever for the morning to come, so that they might get back to land.

It was quite late before they felt any disposition to sleep; but notwithstanding the excitement, and the discomforts of their situation, they began at length to experience the effects of the fatigue and anxiety which they had undergone, and bestowing them-

selves as conveniently as possible about the boat, bade each other "good-night," and one by one dropped asleep.

The two or three hours immediately preceding dawn seemed terribly long. Just as the first gray light appeared in the east, Frank joined them.

A dense volume of vapor, which rested upon the water and contributed to the obscurity in which they were enveloped, now gathered slowly into masses and floated upward, as the day advanced, gradually clearing the prospect; and they kept looking out for the island, in the momentary expectation of seeing it loom up before them through the mist. But when, as the light increased and the fog rolled away, the boundaries of their vision rapidly enlarged, and still no land could be seen, they began to feel seriously alarmed.

A short period of intense and painful anxiety followed, during which they continued alternately gazing and waiting for more light, and again straining their aching eyes in every direction, and still in vain.

At last it became evident that they had, in some manner, drifted completely away from the island. The appalling conviction could no longer be resisted. There they were, lost and helpless on the open ocean, in their chip of a boat, without provisions for a single day, or, to speak more definitely, without a morsel of bread, or a drop of water, or even a compass to steer by.

They felt downhearted enough, but the consternation of the other three boys, when they awoke and realized the situation, was extreme.

No two of the little company could agree as to the direction in which their island lay. Frank, however, believing that they were already headed toward it, and further, that the weather would change for the worse before many hours, determined to continue on their present course, and accordingly no change was made.

Soon the storm Frank had foreseen arose, and continued without intermission or abatement for the next twenty-four hours, and to avoid the danger of being swamped, they were obliged to run before it.

The second night, at sunset, the wind fell, and in the morning the sea had become tolerably smooth, with only a moderate breeze blowing. But though the gale had ceased, the weather was still thick, and the sky so obscured by clouds that they could not see the sun, or even fix upon the quarter of the heavens in which it stood. Thus even the means upon which the natives are wont to rely for directing their course upon their long voyages, wholly failed them.

They did not get even a glimpse of the sun all that day; nor the next until late in the afternoon, when it cleared beautifully, and for the first time since the beginning of the storm, they were able to distinguish north from south, and east from west.

They found that they had got completely "turned around," and were headed due north, and they now put about and steered in what they supposed to be the right direction.

At dawn the next day they were surprised to find themselves in sight of a strange island, which none of them remembered having seen before. A remarkable-looking black rock, resembling a huge tombstone or monument, arose abruptly from the sea about half a mile from the shore.

No one—not even Tuataga, at first—could form any conjecture in regard to the island in sight. But presently the young Samoan, in a tone of extreme excitement, exclaimed:

"Oraluka!"

Frank turned quickly, and gave the young islander a searching look.

He knew that an island of that name—the subject of a thousand appalling stories, to which he had often incredulously listened—

was said to lie somewhere in that latitude; but he had never met with any one who could give him any definite and satisfactory information respecting it.

According to general report, its inhabitants were cannibals, and were in the habit of murdering and devouring all who were so unfortunate as to be cast upon their shores, or who had the hardihood or temerity voluntarily to land upon them.

It was also said that the island had never been visited by white men; and, owing to the popular belief in regard to the ferocious and warlike character of its people, it is certain that the natives of the neighboring groups could not, as a general thing, be induced by any consideration to engage in a voyage having this reputed cannibal island for its destination.

Among the other marvelous reports concerning Oraluka, was one to the effect that its inhabitants were possessed of immense hoards of pearls and shell, of the value of which they were utterly ignorant.

Tuataga said that one of his captors had declared that, about a year since, he had embarked for Oraluka with a party in a large canoe, being tempted to incur the perils of the enterprise by the prospect of the enormous gains that might be realized in trading with the natives, if a friendly intercourse could once be established with them.

They had succeeded in reaching the island, he said; but scarcely had they set foot on shore when they were attacked by a party of the inhabitants, who issued suddenly from the forest, and, disregarding all their friendly signs and gestures, fell upon them and killed the greater part of their number, the rest making their escape with the greatest difficulty.

Tony's curiosity and love of adventure were stimulated by what he heard, and he was eager to land at once.

Frank, too, was anxious to reach the shore, but for a very different reason. They were all suffering horribly from hunger and thirst, and he could no longer bear to see little Arty's agony.

"Any fate is better than this," he said, and steered boldly for the island.

CHAPTER XII.

THE KING OF THE CANNIBAL ISLAND.

On approaching the shore, the boys found that a heavy surf broke upon it, but there was a good beach, and a landing could be effected without much difficulty. They accordingly took in their sail, and resorting to the oars, made for what seemed to be a favorable spot.

Soon after passing the black rock before alluded to, they observed several figures stealing along the shore, in the covert of a row of mangroves, and apparently watching their movements.

When they had reached the edge of the surf, and were preparing to dash through it, these figures came rushing out of the thicket, and with threatening gestures warned them away.

This startled the three younger boys a good deal, and they earnestly begged their leader not to go any nearer; but Frank stood up in the bow, and made such signs and gestures as are used to indicate peaceful and friendly intentions, while Tony displayed some attractive-looking trinkets, which he had found in the boat's locker, and which heretofore had been suffered to remain there, as being of little value.

The people on shore now seemed to confer together, and in a few moments one of their number, who from his stained tiputa of yellow and crimson, appeared to be a chief, or person of consequence, came down to the water's edge, waving a green bough and beckoning to them to land.

Tuataga warned Frank that this sudden apparent change in

their disposition might be a treacherous pretense, designed to lure them ashore, in order to plunder, kill and devour them; but Frank assured him that their Winchesters would be a sufficient protection, and prepared to force the boat through the surf.

The party of natives did not seem greatly to outnumber the boys, and were not particularly formidable in their appearance. They were, as well as Frank could judge at such a distance, of no more than the ordinary stature. With the exception of the individual already referred to, in the gay tiputa, they wore nothing but the maro, and were armed with long spears. Nevertheless, even Harry hesitated to make any nearer approach, suspecting that more of the natives were lurking among the mangroves, ready to sally out upon them at the proper moment, if they should venture to land.

Frank, finding all attempts to overcome the reluctance of the younger boys unavailing, took a few trinkets from Tony, and springing overboard, swam through the surf to the shore. The native in the tiputa waited to receive him, continuing to wave the green branch and to make amicable signs.

Frank advanced, and greeted him in the Polynesian fashion, by rubbing faces. The two then walked together to the edge of the woods, where the others still remained; and Frank, after distributing his trinkets, came down to the beach again, and beckoned to the rest to come ashore.

As soon as the boat was beached, and they were all fairly on land, the natives came forward somewhat hastily from the edge of the woods, probably in expectation of receiving further presents; but the boys, mistaking this sudden advance for a hostile movement, laid hold of the boat, and would have put her in the water again, had not Frank and Tony interfered with so much decision and vigor that their fears began to take a new direction, and they came to the sensible conclusion that they had better run the risk of being roasted alive and eaten by the cannibals, than incur the anger of their best friends.

The leader of the party of natives now advanced, and throwing himself into an oratorical attitude, waved his hand gracefully, and made a little speech, thanking Frank for his gifts, and welcoming the young Papalanji to the island. The language which he spoke was but slightly different from the Samoan, and neither Frank nor Tuataga had any difficulty in understanding what he said.

When he had finished, Frank made an appropriate reply, according to the rules of Polynesian etiquette. He commenced by paying the young chief some florid compliments. He then gave a graphic account of their involuntary voyage, describing the fight, and the storm which they had encountered, in such terms that their escape must have seemed little short of a miracle; and concluded by stating the manner in which they had been driven from their course and finally reached the island.

The natives listened attentively, and signified their sense of Frank's eloquence by frequent exclamations of "Maitai! maitai!"—good! good!—and by nodding their heads emphatically at the end of every sentence.

As soon as the speechmaking was over, the natives, who seemed thus far quite friendly and inoffensive, came forward once more, and all went through the ceremony of rubbing faces with a great show of cordiality.

Frank and Tony received more than their due proportion of these civilities, though all the American boys were examined with the closest attention, and, from the remarks of the natives, it was easy to see that most of them, at least, had never seen a white person before.

The chief of the party was called Taimua. He was a young man, with a handsome face, expressive of good nature and indolence. Frank walked apart with him to make inquiries about

food for the boys, and stores for the boat, in case it was thought best to try to return to their own island again. Meanwhile Tony, through Tuataga, made a few inquiries on his own account.

After Taimua had concluded his conference with Frank, he led the boys to a large building near the beach, which was completely overshadowed by aged tamanu trees. It seemed, from its size and peculiar structure, to be a deserted marac, or, possibly, a maneaba. He then sent away two or three of his people, who soon returned with several clusters of cocoanuts, and some bananas, and roast pig for their refreshment. They were also supplied with plenty of fresh water for present use.

The natives had come down to the shore, as the boys now learned, for the purpose of cutting mangrove roots, from which they make large and powerful bows, and the whole party soon left them at the maneaba, and proceeded to the beach; in about an hour they saw them depart inland, carrying bundles of these roots, without taking any further notice of them.

Some two or three hours later, a number of the natives they had seen in the morning again made their appearance, with several large calabashes of water, and a quantity of taro and bread-fruit, for the use of their guests.

A few minutes afterward Taimua himself emerged from the grove, attended by quite a large party.

He entered the maneaba, and after some little talk with Frank, turned abruptly to Tony, and saying that he must now return to the village, invited him to go with him to visit it.

Tony, appearing to hesitate, the chief pressed the matter so earnestly, that his suspicions were aroused, and he peremptorily declined.

Taimua's angry looks evinced his displeasure, and after walking about for some time in sullen silence, he at length made a similar request of Frank, letting drop at the same time an expression to the effect that one of them must go with him.

Frank saw plainly that for some reason the young chief had set his heart upon having either Tony or himself visit his village, and he suspected that this was, in fact, the sole object of his return.

He observed also that his party was more numerous, and much better armed than it had been in the morning, and he had no doubt that rather than suffer himself to be baffled in his purpose, he would resort to force to accomplish it.

After a moment's reflection, therefore, he resolved to accept the invitation, for he had no wish for a hostile collision between the natives and his own party.

On making his decision known to his friends, Tony promptly declared that he would go too, and Tuataga asked for permission to accompany them.

This did not please Taimua, but he sullenly acquiesced in the arrangement.

The chief was impatient to set out at once, and Frank having given some directions to the three boys left behind, as to their conduct during his absence, they started, little dreaming how their visit to the cannibal village was to terminate.

CHAPTER XIII.

TAIMUA'S VILLAGE—FRANK AND TONY RESOLVE TO SAVE A LIFE.

A quarter of an hour's walk brought Taimua, and the party with him, to a flourishing breadfruit plantation, which they passed through without seeing a single dwelling, or any indications of inhabitants.

The plantation was bounded by a wild ravine, crossing which, they entered a dense and gloomy grove, composed almost entirely of the sacred miro, and one other kind of tree, the branches

of which sprang horizontally from the trunk in a series of whorls, one above another, twisting around from left to right, and clothed with broad leaves of so dark a green as to seem almost black.

Near the center of this grove, they came suddenly upon a large marai, built principally of loose stones, overgrown with moss and lichens.

It was a spacious, uncovered inclosure, the front of which consisted of a strong bamboo fence, while the three remaining sides were of stone.

Within the inclosure, at one side, was a small building, probably the priest's dwelling, and in the center arose a solid pyramidal structure, on the terraced sides of which were ranged the hideous, misshapen figures of several gigantic idols.

In front of this, and between four rude heaps of broken coral, was a low platform, supported by stakes, and resembling the altars used for human sacrifices, during the reign of heathenism in many of the groups of Polynesia.

Beneath this platform or altar, was a pile of human skulls; and suspended from the trees were other skulls, as well as the shells of enormous turtles, and the skeletons of fishes.

A hideous-looking old man, whom Frank, at least, knew to be the priest, sat at the door of the small building within the inclosure, and looking intently at the boys, made strange faces as they passed by.

His skin was sallow, and most singularly speckled, probably from some cutaneous disease; he was, perfectly bald, there not being a single hair either on his head or face—not even one where his eyebrows should have been; his eyes were small and glittering like those of a snake; his mouth was large and opened, disclosing a few scattered, yellow fangs, and in his countenance there was a mingled expression of cunning and cruelty that made one shudder.

When the boys were nearest to him in passing, he struck himself violently on the breast, and cried out in a strong but dissonant voice, pointing with his long, skeleton finger toward the young chief.

"Taimua, son of Tuiatafu, rob not the servant of Oro of a priest's share!"

The young chief looked exceedingly annoyed, and half angry, but the natives with him hurried on, without seeming to pay any attention to the words of the priest.

"What did the lubber say?" inquired Tony of Frank, in a low tone.

Frank explained.

"The deuce!" growled Tony, "they're going to make a cannibal feast of us, and that speckled-faced old swab is speaking for his share in time!"

"It looks very much like it, I confess," returned Frank, in a grave tone.

"Well, they'll have a red-hot time getting me over the fire, you bet," said Tony, determinedly. "Some of 'em will go to the grass first, as sure as my name is Tony Bright."

"We'll all three make a good fight if it's necessary, that's a sure thing," said Frank.

"And you think it will be necessary?"

Frank looked around.

The dark grove, the great idolatrous-looking marai, with its heathen altar and monstrous images; the pile of skulls; the strange fruit hanging from the trees; the hideous old man and his strange words, all tended to suggest vague but most startling suspicions. But another glance at the open and friendly countenances of the young chief and those with him somewhat reassured him, and he hastened to reply;

"I am not quite sure yet, Tony; it may not be as bad as we think."

Then, turning to Taimua, he said:

"That is a strange-looking place we have just passed."

"Strange!" returned the chief. "It is the Fare no Oro—the house of Oro. A great and solemn feast is to be celebrated there very soon."

"A feast, eh?" said Frank, thoughtfully.

"Yes, such a feast as this island has not seen for many years. Did you notice the skulls beneath the altar?"

"Yes."

"They caused you to wonder, no doubt?"

"Yes, they certainly excited my curiosity."

"They belonged to the priests who have officiated at the marai, and whose remains have been buried within the inclosure; it is a long-established custom with us that their skulls shall finally be deposited beneath the altar."

"But I saw many skulls hanging from the trees?" said Frank, in a half inquiring tone.

"Ah, that's different!" was the abrupt reply.

All this time they were hurrying forward. The dark woods was bounded by a charming valley, with a brook running through it, and the boys were glad to escape from its gloomy shade into the cheerful light.

They forded the shallow stream, which was so clear that every pebble in its gravelly bed was visible, and found themselves at the foot of a long, green slope.

Before them, lying partly in the valley, and straggling halfway up the ascent, was a pretty village. The neat and light-built native dwellings dotted the side of the slope, or peeped out from among embowering trees along the banks of the stream in the most picturesque manner. The thatching of the cottages, bleached to an almost snowy whiteness, offered a pleasing contrast to the surrounding verdure.

Troops of children were pursuing their sport in every direction. Some were wading in the stream, or sailing tiny boats, others were swinging on ropes of sennet, suspended from branches of the trees, and a few were quietly sitting in the shade, making bouquets and wreaths of wild flowers. No grown persons were to be seen, most of them, probably, being at that hour asleep in their houses.

In passing through the village, the native escort closed around the boys in such a manner as to screen them from observation, and they reached the top of the slope without seeming to have attracted notice.

Here Taimua dismissed all his attendants except two, and they then struck into a fine avenue of well-grown trees, running along the crest of the hill, and leading to a large native house of oval form, prettily situated upon a green knoll, and overshadowed by wide-branching breadfruit trees.

This, Taimua informed the boys, was his dwelling.

At a short distance from the house, beneath a fan palm, was a group of young girls, so entirely absorbed in the congenial task of arranging one another's abundant tresses, and adorning themselves with flowers, that they did not observe the little party's approach.

Taimua pointed out the most attractive of these girls, and with an air of great complacency, informed his guests that she was his wife, Leiata.

As they approached the pretty group, the girls looked up, and with little screams of consternation, made a show of scampering off into the grove, but apparently thought better of it, and concluded to stand their ground.

At first they seemed actually afraid of Frank and Tony, peep-

ing cautiously at them over one another's shoulders from a safe distance. Presently, however, one, more enterprising than the rest, ventured so far as to reach out her hand and touch Tony on the cheek, when, finding that no disastrous consequences immediately followed this act of temerity, they gradually laid aside their apprehensions, and pressing around the two boys, soon became sufficiently familiar to try a variety of highly original and interesting experiments upon their complexion and clothing.

One of the girls, after examining Tony's fair skin and light hair, gravely communicated to a companion her conviction that the strangers had come from the moon. The other thought not, and attributed their paleness to the influence of some fearful sickness; while a third, being of a skeptical and suspicious turn of mind, suddenly seized Tony by the wrist, and spitting on her palm, commenced scrubbing his hand with great vigor, to see if the color were fast.

The tight-fitting garments of the boys, too, seemed to puzzle them exceedingly; they were at a loss to know whether they were a natural or an artificial covering, and when at last they had learned the truth by getting possession of Tony's coat, that modest youth was in momentary dread, as he informed Frank, lest the now awakened spirit of investigation and experiment should prompt their new friends to still more embarrassing extremes.

This, however, proved to be a groundless apprehension, for their curiosity was presently diverted by the appearance of an old woman, who summoned the whole party to dinner.

Taimua leading the way, they proceeded toward the dwelling. It was surrounded by a strong but neat hedge of the ti-plant, some three and a half feet high, with an ingeniously-contrived gate opposite the door. A path strewn with marine shells and fragments of white coral led from the gate to the door.

The space within the inclosure was chiefly devoted to the cultivation of yams and other vegetables, though Leiata informed her guests that she had a flower garden, all her own, on the other side of the house.

The dwelling itself was a model of native architecture. It was oval in shape, and the sides were inclosed with handsome mats, with spaces left for light and air. The roof was composed of a firm and durable thatch of pandanus leaves, strung upon small reeds, laid close together, and overlapping one another from the eaves to the ridge pole.

On entering the house, they found a woman at one end of the room pounding taro, or breadfruit, in a wooden mortar; another, apparently very old and infirm, was sitting upon a low stool near the wall, swaying her body slowly from side to side, and making a low, monotonous noise.

Frank soon discovered, by a remark which Taimua carelessly dropped, that this unhappy creature was to be destroyed by her own friends on account of her age and infirmities, according to a most horrible and unnatural, but by far too prevalent custom. He quietly communicated what he had learned to Tony, and the two resolved to prevent the revolting murder if it was in their power to do so.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE BRINK OF THE GRAVE—THE DREAD MESSENGER.

Meantime, the meal to which the party had been summoned, was spread under a monster shade tree beside the house. It consisted of baked fish, served up in banana leaves, roasted yams, poi-poi, a preparation of breadfruit, and an excellent kind of pudding, made of cocoanut pulp and taro.

As the boys continued to dispose of these various viands, their respect for Leiata as a housekeeper increased enormously.

Hardly had the meal finished when it was suggested that they should all go to a neighboring grove on the banks of the stream, and they set out at once.

On reaching the place, they found quite a number of the natives, of all ages and both sexes, assembled; and though they soon began to gather about the white strangers with inquisitive looks, the boys were subjected to much less annoyance than might reasonably have been expected under the circumstances.

Tony, who possessed an enviable faculty of adapting himself to all sorts of people and circumstances, was in a few moments as much at home among the villagers as if he had lived for years in their midst.

He gossiped with the old people, with a little assistance from Frank or Tuataga, romped with the children, and chatted and frolicked with the prettiest and most lively of the island beauties, to the manifest disapprobation of several grim-looking young savages, who stalked about in sullen dignity, watching these familiar proceedings of the good-looking stranger with rising jealousy and indignation.

At length a bevy of laughing girls, in order to increase the excitement, fell to pelting him with buds and blossoms and pandanus cones, the last of which, in willing hands, are capable of doing decided mischief. Foremost among the assailants were Leiata's companions of the morning, and even Leiata herself took a hand in the sport.

While the fun was at its height, the old priest happened to be mentioned, and Tony, comprehending what was said, spoke slightly of Oro's minister, and Tuataga, who was standing by, foolishly translated the remark.

Almost at the same time, Frank, who was conversing with Taimua, thought it a good opportunity to plead for the life of the old woman whom he had seen in the chief's house, and who, in fact, was his grandmother.

He told the chief that it was a very bad religion that sanctioned, and even encouraged, the murder of the old and helpless, and that a priest who inculcated such practices was himself not fit to live.

A young savage who was standing near, and who had taken mortal offense on account of the attentions Tony had bestowed upon one of the fair maidens, having overheard all that was said by the two boys, suddenly drew away from the crowd and disappeared in the forest beyond the stream.

A little later, and while the merriment was still going on, a fresh party, of some ten or a dozen men, crossed the stream and mingled with the others.

"There's the old priest again!" suddenly exclaimed one of the girls, in a vexed tone. "What can he be wanting here?"

Frank looked around but could not see him.

The newcomers did not appear to be in the same holiday humor as the throng around them; they walked gravely about, without joining in the general mirth and gayety, and manifested none of the curiosity in regard to the strangers that the others had evinced.

The boys, however, thought nothing of this at the time, supposing that they had been of the number of those whom they had seen in the morning by the seashore, although they did not recognize any of them.

Presently, one and then another of them disappeared in the direction of Taimua's house, and a little later an exclamation went up from the crowd, and Leiata came rushing toward her husband with a cry of grief.

"What is it, Leiata?" he asked, hurriedly. "What troubles you?"

"Mamalava—they are taking her!" she sobbed.

"What! so soon?"

"Yes!" exclaimed a hard, stern voice behind them, "they are taking her now; and you, Taimua, son of Tuiatafu, must hold one end of the tappa that chokes out her life."

Frank looked around once more, and this time beheld the old priest of the marai.

But how changed, since he last saw him!

Every sign of age and decrepitude had vanished; his misshapen frame seemed dilated, and instinct with nervous energy; his face was pale with the intensity of his fury, and his small eyes flashed fire.

Tony, too, caught sight of the old man, and involuntarily shuddered.

When they looked again, a moment later, he was gone.

Taimua, with a dark and frowning brow, turned to those about him and said: "Come!" and, followed by his weeping wife, and the whole company, they proceeded to a burial place, where they found several men digging a grave, under the priest's directions, while two others were approaching, bearing the chief's grandmother between them.

The grave was quickly ready, and the helpless old woman was deposited on the ground, in a sitting posture, beside it.

A piece of tappa was produced, and the priest called upon Taimua to pass it around his grandmother's neck, while an assistant priest held the other end.

The young chief stepped forward in a docile manner to obey, when his wife, springing before him, clasped her arms about the old woman's neck, and wept over her.

By the priest's harsh orders, she was removed, and the tappa was passed about the victim's throat.

Usually, in such cases, the unfortunates submit without a struggle, or even a murmur, but in this instance, the victim, instead of submitting quietly and willingly to her fate, suddenly lost her courage, and opposed a frantic and desperate resistance to her murderers.

Her heartrending cries, her fearful struggles, and, more than all, the horrid indifference and cruelty of many of those about her, were more than Frank and Tony could bear.

The latter, suddenly starting forward, shook his fist in the old priest's face, and called him all the uncomplimentary names he could lay his tongue to, while Frank expostulated with the crowd, endeavoring to make them see what a horrible and unnatural crime they were about to commit.

He also told them that there was a greater God than Oro, who could not look upon such cruelty unmoved, and that in the end they would surely be punished for it.

The old priest had snatched a barbed spear from the hand of a savage standing by him, and now, with flashing eyes and voice of rage, he cried out:

"Perish, thou reviler of Oro and his priests!" and hurled the spear at Frank with so true an aim that, if he had not stooped as it left the thrower's hand, it would have struck him in the face.

Whizzing over his head, it pierced the tough bark of a breadfruit tree a dozen yards away, where it stood quivering.

Instantly catching a club from another bystander, the priest rushed forward to renew the attack.

He had almost reached the spot where Frank stood, when Tony, with a bound, placed himself between them; and, though without any weapon in his hand—for the boys had carelessly left their rifles at the chief's house, and he had forgotten that he wore a revolver—he motioned him back with a gesture so commanding, and an air at once so resolute and so fearless, that the priest paused.

But it was for an instant only; then, without uttering a word, he aimed a blow full at Tony's head.

The latter caught it in his open palm, wrenched the weapon from him, and adroitly foiling a furious attempt which he made to grapple with him, once more stood upon the defensive with an unruffled aspect, and not the slightest appearance of excitement in his manner.

The baffled priest, livid with rage, looked around for another weapon.

Half a dozen of the men who had arrived upon the ground with him uttered a wild yell, and pressed forward with brandished clubs and spears.

Frank and Tuataga placed themselves by Tony's side, the former with a drawn revolver in his hand.

All was tumult and confusion. The outbreak had been so sud-

den and unexpected to most that the bystanders had not yet recovered from the first shock of astonishment and terror.

Of the women, some shrieked and fled from the spot; others threw themselves between the boys and the armed natives, or invoked the interference of their friends.

Not a great many, even of the men, seemed to participate in the feeling of hostility against them.

But, however inferior in number, the party of their foes far surpassed that of their friends in resolution and energy.

Foremost among them were the chief and the jealous young savage who had overheard and reported Frank and Tony's words. A number of the other young men also, whose anger and jealousy had been aroused by Tony's sudden popularity, and the attention which had been paid the boys, sided zealously with the priest and his party, and joined in the clamor against them.

Meanwhile, Taimua, at Leiata's entreaty, strove to calm the tumult, and to pacify the leader and instigator of it; but his authority was fiercely spurned, and their good-natured protector quailed before the fury of the vindictive old man.

As yet, however, the enemy, conscious that the sympathies of a large number were with the boys, had offered them no actual violence, confining themselves to menacing cries and gestures, by which they seemed to be striving to work themselves up to the required pitch of excitement. This was likely to be speedily attained under the influence of the fierce exhortations and contagious fury of the priest.

Some of the young men, in fact, now commenced a sort of covert attack, by throwing stones and fragments of wood at them from the outskirts of the crowd, and Tony was struck violently by one of these missiles, by which his lip was badly cut.

In the midst of all the excitement, Frank stood, to outward appearance, at least, perfectly composed. Neither the ravings of the priest, nor the menacing attitude of the young men, deprived him of his coolness and presence of mind. He steadily confronted them with an unblenching eye, clutching his weapon in readiness to meet the attack, which he at the same time did nothing, by look or gesture, to provoke.

His calm intrepidity, while it seemed temporarily to restrain the enemy, served also to reassure and steady both Tony and Tuataga, who were getting a little excited; and they endeavored to emulate his self-possession and prepared to act as circumstances should direct.

At this point, Leiata, with tears streaming down her cheeks, besought them to fly to her house, where she was sure, she said, they would be safe from violence.

But though no one had yet laid hands on them, they were surrounded on all sides, and could not with any certainty distinguish friends from foes; and the first movement on their part to escape, they thought, would be the signal for an instant and general attack by the priest and his followers.

They concluded, therefore, to maintain a firm but quiet attitude, until Taimua, and those disposed to protect them, could make their influence felt in their behalf.

But the chief and his friends confined their efforts to feeble expostulations and entreaties, and these amounted to nothing. They could not even restrain the younger and more violent portion of the rabble from carrying on the species of desultory warfare from which Tony had already suffered; on the contrary, the stones and other missiles, thrown by persons on the outskirts of the crowd, fell continually thicker and faster.

At length Frank received a staggering blow on the back of the head from a clod of earth, thrown by some one who had stolen around behind him, and who immediately afterward disappeared in the throng.

"How much longer are we to endure this?" cried Tony. "Must we stand here and suffer ourselves to be murdered by these cowardly attacks? Let's shoot half a dozen of the lubbers, and make a rush for the shore."

But a moment's reflection was enough to show the utter hopelessness of such an attempt. However much the natives might be astonished for an instant by the discharge of firearms, all fear and hesitation would vanish upon their taking to flight.

Their backs once turned would be the mark for a score of ready spears; and except perhaps for Tuataga, whose speed was extraordinary, there would be scarcely the possibility of escape.

At this moment Taimua managed to drag them a little nearer to his house. He finally forced a passage for the boys, and after addressing the crowd for some time in Samoan persuaded them to allow the boys to return to his house.

CHAPTER XV.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

Once inside the house, the savage chief explained that the priest had claimed one of them as a sacrifice and that it was intended that Tony was to be killed the following morning.

"I cannot save you if you stay," he explained through Tuataga, who acted as interpreter, "but if you wait quietly here till night-fall you may make a rush for the boat when all is deserted."

The boys agreed to this, and spent a long and dreary afternoon in the Samoan house.

The crowd dispersed gradually from the front of the house, and shortly after dark all was quiet as the grave.

Taimua then offered to accompany them to their boat; but Frank firmly declined the offer, on the ground that his presence might endanger him, and in the excited and determined mood of the islanders could be no protection to them.

They accordingly took a hurried leave of him and of Leiata, and stole forth into the night.

They passed some distance beyond the point where they had struck into the path in the morning, to avoid the neighborhood of the village, then turning toward the shore, descended into the valley until they reached the stream.

At this point the rivulet was deep and narrow, with a rapid current, but they had no time to look for a ford. Cries and shouts on the hill above them, showed that they were pursued, and a confused clamor from the village indicated the existence of some unusual commotion there.

Tum-tums were beating fiercely, and the long, dismal wail of the tuba-conch resounded through the echoing arches of the forest.

The boys swam the stream as silently as possible, each one holding his weapons above his head in one hand to keep the cartridges dry.

As they climbed the further bank, and plunged into the forest of miros, they could hear the splashing of the water caused by persons fording the stream a short distance below them, and opposite the village.

In the same direction a multitude of candle-nut torches gleamed through the foliage, and revealed dusky forms hurrying hither and thither.

The trees, growing more thinly as they approached the edge of the woods, let in the light, and between their trunks the boys caught a glimpse of the sea.

Right before them was a thicket, tangled with fern, and scarcely twenty yards beyond it lay the beach, shining in the starlight.

As they turned a little aside to avoid the thicket, an appalling yell rang out from it, and more than a dozen dark figures started from their ambush, and sprang into the path before them.

The old priest was at their head, and if ever cruel murder was written upon a human face it was written upon his.

Frank's heart sank; he saw that a desperate struggle was inevitable, and he dared not think what the end might be.

Tony, clubbing his rifle, bounded into their very midst.

"Forward, boys!" he cried, "it is our only hope of escape, if we want to get away without doing some particularly bloody work."

His movements were light as those of a deer, and rapid as lightning.

His first blow stretched the priest at his feet, and in another moment two more of the savages had fallen.

The enemy gave way before him, scattering to the right and left, as if a thunderbolt had suddenly dropped among them.

Frank, to his great regret, was forced to use his revolvers. He discharged them rapidly to the right and left, and with fatal effect, as was witnessed by the groans that followed.

The savages were confounded, and before they could recover from their surprise the three boys had burst through their ranks.

As they reached the shore, Tony looked around and missed Frank—he was no longer with them.

An exulting cry behind them at once explained his absence; at the same time they could hear him call out in a voice broken by pain and exhaustion:

"Save yourselves, I have fallen and am injured; there are more than a hundred savages here, and you can do nothing for me."

Without an instant's hesitation, Tony turned, and he and Tuataga rushed back into the midst of their shouting enemies.

Half a dozen or more of the party which had been in pursuit

of them, were just coming up. The audacity and desperation of their attack seemed to confound them, and three of their number fell almost without a struggle beneath Tony's rapid and relentless blows, while two more were sent to grass by Tuataga's rifle.

Two men who were dragging Frank away, were compelled to leave him at liberty in order to defend themselves.

At that moment a sudden shout from the water, raised by the other three boys, who had either heard the voices of their companions, or seen them when they came out upon the shore, and then a rapid succession of rifle shots, increased the panic of the enemy by causing them to suppose that Tony and his companions were leading back their whole party to the fight, all armed with chain lightning and the thunderbolts of heaven.

They hastily gave way before them, and the boys had all turned once more and gained the beach before they recovered from their surprise, and began to suspect that they had been mistaken.

The boat was just outside the surf, where Harry and Charley, tired out and uneasy over their long wait, were keeping her steady with their oars.

Tony hailed them, and plunged into the water to swim out to them, closely followed by Tuataga, and at a greater distance by Frank.

The natives, stung with shame and rage at having their prisoner torn from them in the very moment of triumph with such reckless boldness, and having overcome in a measure their fear at the sound of firearms, swarmed down to the beach and pursued the boys into the water.

They seemed excited almost to frenzy at the prospect of their escape.

Some, standing upon the shore, assailed the boat with showers of stones, by which Tuataga was slightly and little Arty more severely wounded.

The old priest, who had revived from the stunning blow Tony had given him, was standing on a block of coral, close to the water's edge, directing the attack.

No sooner had Tony been helped into the boat than, throwing down his own wet weapons, and snatching Charley's rifle from his hand, he took careful aim at the old reprobate's headpiece, and fired.

The priest of Oro threw up his hands, and fell forward, face downward, into the water, where the next incoming wave caught him up, and threw him, lifeless, on the shore.

Meantime a score or more of the savages were swimming out after the boys, apparently with a firm determination to board the boat if possible.

In their intense anger and just indignation, the boys fired upon the foremost of these with fatal effect, but the others did not turn back until the little crew had hoisted their sail, and had begun to draw steadily from the land.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRANGE ISLAND—A SOUL-THRILLING CRY.

During the time Frank and his two companions had been at the village, Harry, Charley and Arty, with the assistance of a few of the natives, whom Taimua had left behind him for the purpose, had been industriously at work gathering supplies, and so now the boat was well laden with provisions and water—"enough for a long voyage," as Tony remarked, in a tone of great satisfaction.

The weather was very fine; there was a good breeze blowing, but nothing more than the boat could easily stand. Frank had given a good deal of thought to the subject, and now announced that he was quite confident he could take them right back to their own island.

"Then do it, by all means!" exclaimed Tony, quickly, "for if there's a spot on this earth where we ought to be just about now, it's the island we have a right to call ours."

"For my part," said Charley, in a discontented tone, "the spot where I'd like to be is Melbourne, in Australia."

"What! without your father?" exclaimed Tony, with a peculiar expression.

"Why—no; but then——"

"What is it you're driving at, anyway?" asked Frank of Tony, in a low but earnest voice.

"You just land us on the small island where I watched the mutineers, and perhaps you'll understand," was the evasive answer.

"Come—come, that won't do, Tony," said Frank, somewhat impatiently.

"You want to know something more now, do you?" asked Tony, looking at him curiously.

"I think it will be as well for me to be posted," returned Frank.

"Well, then, during my watch to-night you can keep awake with me, and I will tell you a thing or two that I haven't mentioned to any one yet, and, indeed, have hardly dared to think of myself."

"Do you mean to say that what that consummate villain, Gonzalo, told us was really the truth?"

"There, Frank, don't ask any more questions now. Don't you see that the other boys are getting curious?"

Frank looked up and saw that Charley and Harry were regarding them with eager interest.

He promptly put on an air of indifference, and began busying himself with laying the course of the boat.

The next morning it might have been noticed that his usually grave face wore a still more serious expression than was its wont, but otherwise there were no outward signs of the effect Tony's communication had made upon him.

Five or six days passed without any extraordinary incident, the hours creeping slowly by with the most distressing monotony.

At length, on the morning of the seventh day, Tony, who was on the lookout in the bows, sang out cheerily:

"Land ho!"

And then the monotony changed to excitement.

The boat's head was directed straight to the land, and after two hours it loomed up beautifully before them.

But all at once, as they were nearing the barrier reef, Tony uttered a dismal cry of disappointment.

"Why, what's the row now?" demanded Charley, sharply. "You were awfully anxious to get back to this island, and now you're here, you don't seem satisfied."

"Yes, that's it, I'm here and not satisfied; for the trouble is, you see, we've struck the wrong island."

"The wrong island!" exclaimed Frank in a bewildered tone. "Are you sure of what you say, Tony?"

"Only too sure," was the gloomy reply. "Just tell me, if you can, where our mountain is, and the lookout, and the big tree I showed you one day; and where is the opening in the reef which ought to be about yonder, and the little island, where—"

"There's the little island!" exclaimed Arty, eagerly; "right over there."

"There's a little island, to be sure," said Tony, "but, unfortunately, it is not the island. This one is much smaller than ours, and not half so pretty."

"I see you're right, now," assented Arty, somewhat reluctantly. "But what shall we do? I'm awfully tired of staying so long in this boat. Can't we go ashore and stay a little while?"

Tony looked at Frank.

"What do you say, cap'n?" he asked.

"I think the change might do us good."

"I am sure of it; and then, you know, we could find some fresh food, which would prove a great blessing."

"You're right, and so we'll chance it, especially as I see no signs of human life."

Tony presently pointed out an opening in the barrier reef, and soon having passed it, they landed on the shores of this unknown but beautiful island.

"Oh, Frank!" exclaimed Arty, as he gazed into the clear waters of a shallow stream that entered the lagoon near where they had landed, "here are crawfish, oysters and plenty of other seafood. Let us catch some and build a fire, and enjoy a good hearty meal."

"That's the talk, my boy," cried Harry, and he at once began gathering the materials for a fire.

Frank was perfectly willing, and soon all the boys were busy—some fishing, others gathering oysters and crawfish, and one helping Harry to build the fire.

In a very short time a bountiful meal was ready, which all enjoyed to the utmost; then, after a short nap, Charley proposed that they should explore the island a little.

To this also Frank consented, and they started off along the coast, having resolved, if possible, to make a complete circuit of the island.

Each boy was thoroughly armed, and in addition, Frank carried a good glass, which, after a careful search, had been found in the boat's locker.

After some little time they came to a shallow stream, bordered on the near side by a swampy stretch of land. How to cross it was the question, but one which Tony quickly answered.

There were vast numbers of sea turtles on the beach, and of these they took the liberty to make stepping-stones. They were so large that it took two or three boys to carry one, but after a time they had enough of them in a line where they wanted them, and then crossed the swampy stretch and stream dry shod.

They had the satisfaction, as they sat down on the opposite grassy bank for a moment's rest, to see the creatures extricate themselves nearly in the order, as to time, in which they had put them there.

Proceeding onward along the shore, they came to a narrow passage of water, which, but that the stream ran inland, they might have supposed was the mouth of a river. As they had no turtles here to help them out, they were compelled to skirt the stream toward the interior, until they found its termination.

The current, which was a powerful one, disappeared, at length, in a fissure of living rock, at a point where overhanging foliage would have concealed entirely its further progress had it not been subterranean, which it was.

At this point, they entered the woods, which reached down nearly to the water's edge, or nodded above the crags that formed the shore.

The forest here consisted chiefly of enormous trees of a peculiar kind, whose boughs at certain seasons seemed as if dipped in blood.

There was something sublime in the occasional stillness of those ancient shades, as in the roar of the tempest that bends their sturdiest pillars to the earth. The leaves of this strange but majestic tree now scarce whispered to the passing breeze as they stood beneath it. They suppressed their very breath to listen, and even that whisper ceased.

The grandeur of the scene was enhanced by its undefined extent on every side; for the eye was lost in the dusky distance, where shade joined to shade, until every direct ray of light was excluded. Not one of them had ever, until now, witnessed forest scenery of the kind: They sat on the gnarled roots a while and scarcely spoke.

But at length their attention was attracted by a quick rustling in a neighboring thicket, and they just perceived two forms glide through a slight opening, and ascend a tree with the apparent celerity of flight and pursuit.

For an instant they were hidden by the foliage, and then they appeared, a darkish couple, in the upper branches; but one of them was much larger than the other.

They were monkeys, and the boys watched them gambol about for a moment.

"I am going to have a shot at them," cried Charley, diving into the bushes. A moment later they heard the crack of his rifle.

Then came a brutal yell and a scream that thrilled them to their very souls.

CHAPTER XVII.

TOM TRACY IS DISCOVERED UNDER TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES.

For one single instant the boys hesitated. Then they rushed through the thicket, while the two monkey-like creatures tumbled, crashing from branch to branch, until at length they lay gasping on the ground.

The smaller one, in his death agony, spouted blood from his mouth and throat; the other, also bleeding, lay with his face downward, moaning bitterly.

The boys approached, and Frank stooping down, turned him over.

Then a simultaneous cry of astonishment and horror went up.

It was Tom Tracy! Some articles of clothing still covered his body, but his thin, gaunt visage, nearly concealed by a thicket of matted hair, his skin darkened by the sun, his uncut nails, and wild looks, would scarcely have allowed the belief that here they beheld a former companion but for those same well-worn clothes, which all remembered, and a scar and other marks, too well known to Tony to leave room for any doubt.

The feelings of Charley Curtiss, on learning the result of his wanton thoughtlessness, can better be imagined than described.

He uttered a wild cry of horror when he saw what he had done, and flinging his rifle from him, would in his grief have taken flight, but for Frank Fleetwood, who stopped him.

"We all know you did not mean this," said he; "but one thing I am sure you do mean, and that is—to help to dress his wound, and to nurse him if necessary."

In an instant Charley was at the poor sufferer's side, assisting Frank to the best of his ability.

The wound was not mortal, but the shot, after passing clean through the monkey, had struck Tracy just below the shoulder, and was lodged just under the skin on the other side.

Frank, who, as I think has already been explained, was something of a surgeon, took his knife from his pocket and made a slight incision directly over the bullet; then gently pressing on either side of the cut, he forced the pellet out.

The next thing was to wash and dress the wound; and Charley flew away for the water, while Frank and Tony prepared bandages at the expense of their pocket handkerchiefs and one of Harry's shirt sleeves.

Soon Charley returned, and in a little while the wound was dressed in the best manner the circumstances would permit.

Then it was decided to remove the unconscious patient to the neighborhood of the boat, and make him as comfortable there as possible.

Not having the necessary tools with them for cutting poles and branches to form a litter for their old comrade, four of the boys kneeled and crossed arms while the other two, by almost superhuman efforts, lifted the inert form upon them.

But the difficulty of thus proceeding through the thickest part of a trackless forest was very great, and even dreadful; their fatigue often compelled them to halt, though their moaning charge still bled and kept growing weaker every moment.

They did their utmost, after he had seemingly come to himself, to get a word from him, but finding all their efforts useless, proceeded on their way a nearly silent party.

Had chance, or their own knowledge of the direction necessary to take, been their only guide through the woods, they must, in all probability, have wandered there until their patient had expired. Frank never went anywhere, either in the woods or upon the water, without a pocket compass, in the use of which he was, of course, an expert, and so there was little danger of their making mistakes in traversing the closest entanglements of the forest.

They did not arrive at the point where they had left their boat much before evening.

They found everything just as they had left it, and so were fully satisfied that there were no natives on that side of the island, at least.

They quickly made up a bed of dried grass and leaves, under a glorious tree, by the side of the limpid stream; and then Harry and Tony began to prepare food and warm drinks, while Frank and Charley once more bathed and dressed the sufferer's wounds.

Nothing that brave and kind-hearted boys could do was left undone. Having carefully attended to his wounds, they refreshed and supplied him in every possible way that their means would permit, or their ingenuity devise.

Oh, how Frank did regret the absence of the medicine chest!

"Ah!" he exclaimed, at least a hundred times, "only to think of all the drugs and medicines we have stored away in the cave at home on our own island, and not even so much as a grain of quinine here!"

But, from the very first, in spite of all drawbacks, it was plain to see that Tracy improved, though it was some days before he was able to sit up much, and longer still before he began to look and act much like his former self, and when he did do so, it was quite difficult to get him to say anything about the recent past.

At length, however, he showed some disposition to talk, and Frank and Tony, seated beside him, were eager listeners.

After finding that they were hopelessly separated from the boys, he said, the captain's boat had been headed in a westerly direction, and a strict lookout was kept for any island on which they might have landed, as well as for the boat itself.

In the course of their open-boat voyage they had touched at no less than three islands, where they had hoped to learn something of their lost companions, but every time they had been disappointed.

At length they had come to the beautiful spot where he had been discovered, and, as Mr. Curtiss and the second mate were both quite ill, it was decided that they should remain there for some little time.

The place they selected for a camp was near the mouth of a lovely stream, about four miles north of where they then were,

and Tom, who was no mean cook, was detailed to look after the culinary department.

The other members of the party were off every day, hunting, fishing and exploring; indeed Captain Fleetwood was bent upon becoming familiar with every foot of their temporary home, as he was deeply impressed with the idea that he should find the boys belonging to the other boat somewhere on its shores, or at least some traces of them.

At last it was decided that the whole party should embark on board the boat, and that they should take two or three days, if necessary, and circumnavigate the island.

When the time for departure came it was found that they must leave Tom behind for a while to complete certain arrangements, and make all snug and secure at the camp, in case any intruders should find the spot in their absence.

It was understood that after he had completed his task Tom was to make a short cut across the country to a certain bay, about three and a half miles distant in a straight line, where the boat was expected to meet him at noon, it being fully nine miles to the same point by sea.

Tom saw his shipmates start off with a strange and unaccountable foreboding at his heart, and some two or three hours later, having completed his task, set out to join them.

In due time he reached the little bay, but no boat was there, neither could he discover any signs of one having been there that day.

He waited fully an hour, and then, growing impatient and somewhat alarmed, determined to climb to the summit of a neighboring elevation, from whence he could command an uninterrupted view of all that part of the island and the neighboring waters.

The first thing to attract his attention, after gaining the summit of the hill, was a ship in the offing, and alongside of her he soon discovered two boats, one of which he felt sure was that of his companions.

Both boats were fully manned, and while he stood there watching them they left the ship's side and started for the shore, heading directly for the bay he had just left.

Tom was so intent upon watching the boats that it did not occur to him that they might be coming especially for him, and that if they did not find him on the shore they would hardly know how to account for his absence.

He continued to stand there—not a solitary and conspicuous object in that elevated place, calculated to catch the eye, for the point on which he stood was covered with trees and verdure, and so it would really have been a wonder if he had been discovered from the approaching boats. But unnoticed himself, he saw them enter the bay, and presently he caught sight of an object in the ship's boat that quickly fixed his attention, and soon set him to laughing heartily.

It was a monkey—a restless and mischievous animal, that was cutting up all sorts of monkey shins, to the great discomfort of more than one of the boat's crew.

At length, when the boats were about twenty feet from the shore, the officer in command of the foremost, with an impatient oath, seized the little caricature of man and hurled it overboard.

Any one who knows how a monkey dreads the water can easily understand how frightened the little beast was, and will not wonder at the yell of fear and rage which it sent up.

At first it made a desperate attempt to regain the boat, but a threatening gesture from the officer frightened it off, and it struck out frantically for the shore.

On gaining dry land, it stood erect for a moment, and shaking its little fist at the officer, sent up a yell of defiance, and quickly disappeared in the woods, amid a shout of laughter from the men.

At that moment the booming of a gun from the ship startled Tom, and looking off to the sea, he saw with alarm that a storm was rapidly coming up.

The two boat crews saw it too, and instantly prepared to return to the ship. But first they shouted at the top of their voices, and fired their guns as a signal for Tom to join them.

Unfortunately, when he started for the hilltop, in order not to be burdened with any unnecessary weight, he had hidden his rifle and other firearms near the very spot where the boats were now waiting for him, so he could not return their signals.

He shouted with all his might, as he started down the hillside at full speed, but his voice was not heard, and the boats had put

off, and were outside of the lagoon, long before he reached the spot where they had landed.

Tom Tracy shed bitter tears of rage and disappointment when he realized that he had been left on the island alone, and he even felt that his shipmates had proved themselves hard-hearted in going off and leaving him there. But presently, not far from the spot where their boat had come ashore, he saw a piece of white paper, through which a stick had been thrust and then driven into the ground, and upon securing this he found the following message to himself written upon it:

"DEAR TOM: Return to our camp and prepare everything there for removal. Will come back for you when the storm is over. In haste.
H. FLEETWOOD."

Almost before he had finished reading this brief note the storm burst, and was so terrific that Tom was glad enough to seek the shelter of a shallow cave nearby.

To his astonishment, before he had hardly gained his place of refuge, the monkey had joined him, and by every means but words intimated that he was anxious for his friendship and protection, and from that moment to the hour of the animal's untimely death they had been almost inseparable companions.

The storm lasted all that day and the next, and it was not until late on the morning of the third day that Tom and the Admiral, as he called the monkey, set out for the old camping ground.

In due time he arrived there, and there he had watched and waited, in a solitude worse than death, and until sickness had come, and memory had failed, and he had become a brute, like his companion, and all hope and desire to see a human face had departed from him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BOYS RETURN TO THEIR OWN ISLAND—FINDING TWO OF THE MUTINEERS.

On hearing the conclusion of Tracy's story, some of the boys, and particularly Charley Curtiss, were of the opinion that the ship which had touched at the island had gone down in the storm, and that all their friends who had gone on board of her had perished with her.

But this was not Tony Bright's opinion, neither was it the opinion of Frank Fleetwood. These two believed that most of those belonging to the captain's party were still alive, and, indeed, that they were not far from them at that very time.

Thoroughly convinced on this point, Frank suddenly exclaimed: "Boys, there's no use talking, we must get back to our own island as speedily as possible."

"That's the talk, cap'n," cried Tony; "and I suggest that we begin provisioning the boat at once, so as to be ready to start at daylight in the morning."

"That suits me," said Harry Halstead.

"And me too," added Tuataga, who by this time had the English language down pretty fine; or, at least, fine enough for all practical purposes.

Frank assented to the suggestion, and the work of lading the boat with food and water began.

Before dark the task was accomplished, and after a hearty supper the boys threw themselves upon the ground, under a low-spreading tree, to pass their last night upon this beautiful island.

The next morning they were up bright and early, and Tom Tracy, who was more himself than they had seen him since the night they parted with him under the stern of the *Fortuna*, helped Harry and Tony to cook the breakfast.

The meal over, the boys—six in number now—embarked, and having, after some argument decided the direction in which their island lay, headed the boat for it.

The weather was simply perfect, the wind was fair, and if they were correct in the decision they had arrived at, as to the situation of the island, the voyage promised to be a safe and speedy one.

Some days passed, and Frank was beginning to get a little nervous and anxious, when, early one morning, Tony's cheery voice rang out "Land ho!" and in another moment the whole party knew that their island was before them.

For an hour or more they continued to approach, all gazing eagerly toward the land, to catch sight of some familiar object;

but somehow, to their great astonishment, they were unable to make out much that was in any way familiar.

All at once Tony uttered an exclamation.

"Ha! I understand how it is," he said. "It's our island, fast enough, there can be no mistake about that; but don't you see, we are approaching it at a point some miles west of the spot where we landed before. See, there's the smaller island, away off there to the eastward."

"You're right, Tony," nodded Frank; "and now I can distinguish our lookout and the cavern mountain readily enough."

"So can I," exclaimed Harry; "and it seems as though I could almost see our stronghold."

"I hope those villainous mutineers haven't been back here and found our treasure house," said Charley, musingly.

"I don't believe they have," exclaimed Tony. Then turning to Frank: "Shall we make for the nearest point? It would take some time to reach the smaller island, and I'm free to confess that I'm getting anxious to set foot on shore."

"Yes, Frank," cried Arty, eagerly, "do let us get ashore as soon as possible. I do so want to be inside of our palisade again."

"I have no objection to making a landing at the nearest point," said Frank: "but, as Tony very well knows, we have a certain duty to perform, and even if we pay a visit to our stronghold first, that duty must be attended to before night."

"Right, cap'n; I agree with you," nodded Tony.

A little later, they entered the lagoon by a passage they had never used before, and soon afterward they landed on the main island at a point less than half a mile from their cunningly-concealed home.

Having hidden the boat in a stream, at some little distance from its mouth, they started for the cave in the mountain.

They had walked about a quarter of a mile, when Arty stumbled on something concealed in the rank weeds and grass, and their attention was attracted by a feeble cry.

It was a human cry, and all instantly stopped, filled with strange apprehensions.

An examination of the spot was quickly made, and two men were found lying there—men who had formerly been their shipmates. This they knew because they were dressed in some of the well-known garments in which they had seen them last; but so frightful was the state of emaciation in which they appeared, that it was scarcely possible to recognize them by their faces; in fact, they did not know the boys; for they were too far gone to take notice of their presence, or to utter other sounds than moans so weak as scarcely to be audible at times.

The men were Josh Jopson and Dan Walker, two of those who had joined the mutineers of the *Fortuna*. Poor fellows! misery had nearly done its utmost for them. Blackened, distorted and wasted by want and suffering, their countenances seemed to resemble nothing that the boys had ever seen before.

They drew them forth from their place of concealment; but the attempt to place them on their feet was vain. They, therefore, made a litter of branches, and conveyed them without delay up the mountainside to their stronghold.

Weak and frail, as we are at the best, it is simply wonderful how long the spark of life will linger in a frame crushed by the pressure of calamity and deprived of food and shelter. The grass had actually grown through the hair of these two men, and the worms had almost claimed them for their own.

The boys found their stronghold exactly as they had left it; apparently no intruder had been near the spot. Having unfastened the gate and entered, they made up beds for the unfortunate men in the great house, divested them of their tattered clothes, cleansed them, and administered cordials and medicines, plentifully supplied by the stores in the neighboring cave.

All thought of the trip to the smaller island was given up for the time being. The six boys were now doctors, nurses and men of all work, and enjoyed the refreshing change of an interesting and arduous employment, exercised not for themselves, but on account of others, and those others their enemies!

They were indefatigable in their attentions upon the sufferers. They almost neglected their own wants in the engrossing anxiety to preserve the lives of these two men, whose faults were all forgotten, or lost sight of, in their distress and danger.

They almost killed them with their kindness, and poor Walker in particular was very nearly suffocated with weak brandy which Tony poured into his mouth, and which he was quite unable to

swallow. The quick eye of Frank Fleetwood saw the mischief, and in a moment he set Dan up, and thus relieved him.

Dan, however, sank down again, and slept for some hours so heavily that Frank was afraid he would never wake again. Josh had duly swallowed the weak brandy given him, and he rolled in delirium, accordingly, for a day and a night.

Nature, and not the physicians, must in this case, as in many others, have the merit of their restoration. Notwithstanding the superabundance of doses administered, the patients lived, and gradually regained their strength and recollections. They had repeatedly called upon their shipmates by name, entreating them to come and hear their horrid dreams; but at length these wanderings ceased, and they gazed in silent astonishment about them.

At length they recognized the boys, and became aware of their own situation; but scarcely could they be induced to believe that the young fellows had erected the building in which they lay.

Frank and Tony led them out, when their limbs would permit and showed them all that they had done; and then, in the most cordial manner possible, invited them to become their companions, and share the fruits of their labors.

The poor fellows had left all their discontent and evil dispositions behind them; they looked upon Frank and those with him as their preservers and only protectors, and, with tears of gratitude, they thanked them, and promised to stand by them through thick and thin, and do anything in the world they told them.

The boys perceived that they had undergone great bodily and mental suffering since the time of the mutiny, the recollection of which made them shudder, and it was some time before they hinted their desire to hear an account of their adventures. At length Frank asked them if they regretted taking part with Silas Sanders, Miguel Gonzalo, and the other mutineers.

"Oh, Mr. Fleetwood," said Jopson, covering his face with his hands, "it has been dreadful."

"What has been dreadful? Where have you all been? Where are Sanders, Gonzalo and Bassana? And where is the *Fortuna*?"

"Oh, Josh, are you going to tell it now?" exclaimed Walker, hiding his face between his arms on the table.

"I should like to wait till morning," said Jopson, slowly. "I am so low and melancholy to-night."

The boys waited nearly a week before the truth came out.

Meantime Frank and Tony made a prolonged visit to the smaller island, and afterward, accompanied by Harry, explored the main island for several miles, both to the east and to the west, but if they discovered anything of importance, for the time being, at least, they kept it to themselves.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOSH JOPSON MAKES SOME EXPLANATIONS—THE OUTLAWS OF THE ISLE.

"After your escape," began Josh Jopson one evening, "we lay for more than twenty-four hours, waiting for the return of our boat, but it never came back, as you very well know, being destroyed by a waterspout, Gonzalo alone escaping the terrible fate of his companions.

"Satisfied that something had gone wrong with the boat's crew, Silas Sanders, who was in command of the ship, laid her on a westerly course, hoping to gain some tidings of the men, but it was a long time before we did so.

"What our life was on board the *Fortuna* for the next few weeks I shall not undertake to tell you; perhaps you can guess at some of its horrors.

"At length, not far from this very island, we fell in with a stranger, and were just preparing for a fight, when, to our astonishment, we found the vessel was in the hands of outlaws like ourselves.

"Soon, in answer to our signals, they sent a boat aboard of us, and then we were still more astonished to find that Miguel Gonzalo was in command of the other craft.

"In answer to our eager questions, he informed us of the fate of the others who had been with him in the boat we sent after you; of how you had saved his life, and afterward left him on a desert island, with only a native for a companion; of how some time later a vessel had touched at the island and taken him off, and of his great astonishment at finding on board that vessel Captain Fleetwood, the first and second mates of the *Fortuna*, Mr. Curtiss, and the boatswain and ship's carpenter.

"At sight of him Captain Fleetwood was furious; but Gonzalo

made some plausible excuse—told how he had repented, and in consequence been left on that lonely spot by his companions to die, and so he was permitted to remain.

"He soon learned that the vessel had recently picked up the captain and his companions, just off a neighboring island, to which they were about to return, in order to rescue one man who had been left behind. But knowing the island where we now are, and feeling sure that he would find a band of desperate outlaws here, he determined to induce the captain to come here at once, and this he had little trouble in doing, for he had only to throw out a hint that he had been informed by the native he had left behind that there were four or five boys on this island, at the same time carefully giving its situation.

"The captain took the bait, and they sailed for this point without loss of time. Captain Fleetwood and his companions came ashore as soon as the anchor was down, landing on the smaller island, and Gonzalo and a number of men whose minds he had succeeded in poisoning, together with one or two of the ship's officers, landed soon after them, their ostensible object being to secure fresh water.

"Presently, at the spring, a fight was precipitated, and several were killed, among them the ship's officers, Fleetwood's party, or those of them who were left alive, seeking safety in flight.

"Gonzalo and his men, thinking it safe to leave these for a while, as they had no way of escape, and fearing those on board the ship might take the alarm, hastened to their boats and pulled off to the vessel.

"What followed I think you know. You yourselves suddenly and unexpectedly made your appearance, and though you came near succeeding in what you undertook, Gonzalo was ahead of you, and managed to gain the ship.

"He would then have wiped you out at once, and afterward landed again and taken vengeance on his old commander and those with him; but a strange sail appeared in sight, and he thought it safer to haul off.

"Later he did return, and then it was that we met him.

"Both vessels were brought to anchor under shelter of the smaller island, and we held a conference, the result of which was that we united forces, and also became members of the powerful outlaw league that has its headquarters here."

"What's that?" exclaimed Frank, in surprise and consternation. "The headquarters of an outlaws' league situated on this island?"

"Just so," nodded Josh.

"How can that be?" demanded Tony. "We have seen no signs of outlaws, or, indeed, of any other human beings having been here in recent years."

"That's not to be wondered at," was the answer. "There are only a few, besides the women and children, who remain here constantly, and they being superannuated, seldom go into the interior, and hardly ever beyond the boundaries of their own stronghold. The others—the active outlaws—when they come, only remain here a little while at a time, and during the past year or so they have not been here more than two or three times in all, though they expect to come oftener and remain longer in the future."

"That's a pleasant prospect for us," muttered Charley.

"Where is their stronghold?" asked Tony, thoughtfully.

"On the far opposite side of this mountain, or mountain range," answered Josh.

"What! away to the extreme northwest?"

"Yes."

"What kind of people are they?"

"The offscouring of the earth. There are men of every nation among them; but a majority of them have Malay blood in their veins, and most of their women are Malaysians."

"And are any of the active outlaws here now?" asked Harry.

"Yes; one of their vessels is at anchor in the hidden basin, where the *Fortuna* is also laid up, and there are at least a hundred and fifty of the villains, without counting the women and children, in their stronghold."

"Good heavens! But see here, Josh, haven't they got plenty to eat and drink?" asked Tony.

"Why, yes, of course; there's never any lack of victuals among them."

"Then how comes it that you and Dan here were in the terrible condition in which we found you?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Dan, with a shudder, "now you're coming to it, and I'd about as soon die as hear it repeated!"

"But, Dan," said Josh, reproachfully, "you know they must hear it, and I must tell it; it's my duty to do so."

"Yes, I suppose so," assented Dan, with a sigh.

"Well, then," said Josh, in answer to Tony's question, "you must know that the leaders of the outlaws' league are the very worst tyrants on earth—the worst, because they are the most bloodthirsty, heartless men alive."

"They spare no prisoners that they take, unless, indeed, they join them, and enter, heart and soul, into their villainy; otherwise they act on the maxim that 'dead men tell no tales.'"

"Dan and I had been taken down with fever on board the *Fortuna*, and so were put on shore, to get well or die. After a while we got a little better, and then were given light work to do about the cavern and stronghold."

"Some days after this a number of prisoners were brought in, who were speedily condemned to death, and we were ordered to assist in killing them."

"Ha!" gasped Frank Fleetwood, who was listening intently.

"We had both for a long time repented of having joined Sanders and the rest, and now we could not bring ourselves to take part in the murder of these innocent men."

"The rage of our leaders was terrible, and what we suffered in the way of punishment was terrible."

"At length we managed to escape from our prison in the great cave of the mountain, and we wandered about at night, for we dare not venture to show ourselves by day, till we fell where you found us."

"And these—these prisoners whom you were ordered to assist in putting to death, who were they?"

Josh looked at Dan, but did not answer.

"Do we know them?" at length asked Frank, desperately.

"Yes," answered Josh at last, "you know them; but I fear you will never see them again."

"Are you sure of what you say? Are you certain they are dead?"

"Listen. In this mountain there is a vast cavern, and many wonderful passages, some of them miles in length. In one place there is an awful, well-like abyss, with water at the bottom."

"I think we know the place."

"Well, there it is that the outlaws silence their victims forever, and—"

"Is there any chance that our fathers were not executed?" interrupted Frank.

"Yes," said Josh, "they may have escaped their captors and hid in some nook of the caverns."

"Well, then, we'll search for them," said Frank. "The cave we discovered must be one of the upper stories of the stronghold."

"Good! I'll go and find the ladder," and Tony darted into the cavern.

"Seems to me this is a mighty dangerous experiment you're going to try," said Walker, looking uneasily at Frank.

"I think so, too," exclaimed Charley, quickly. "And then what good will it do? If any of our friends are left alive, and should see or hear us coming, they'd run and hide, thinking we were the enemy, and so we should never find them in the world."

"Well, has anybody else anything to say, or to suggest?" asked Frank, looking over the group.

No one spoke; and after a moment of deep thought, the young leader went on, almost as if speaking to himself:

"Yes, now I understand it all. Now I know that we heard something more than echoes when we first found our way into this cavern. Do you remember the strange kind of laughter we heard, and the voices, boys?"

"Ah, indeed we do," exclaimed Harry and one or two others quickly.

"Oh, this horrible, hollow mountain!" cried Charley. "I wish we had never seen it."

"Well," said Frank, "we have seen it, and now we know more about it than we ever knew before. Undoubtedly those bloodthirsty villains have destroyed hundreds of valuable lives by casting their victims into that fearful black abyss. It's time all this was ended." Then starting to his feet and raising his hand aloft: "And, by heavens, I will end it, or die in the attempt!"

"Oh, Frank, don't say that," cried Charley. "How can we, a mere handful of boys, destroy more than one hundred and fifty desperate villains?"

"We can find a way, I am sure of it," was the confident reply. "But the first thing is to rescue our friends. Even if they are dead, we ought to know it."

There was a general shudder and drawing back, and more tongues than one declared that they could not take part in such a reckless venture.

"What's that?" demanded Frank, sternly. "What's that you cannot do?"

"We can't go down into the gulf on Tony's ladder to look for any one at all," was the almost sullen answer.

"Well, then, I will tell you what I cannot do," retorted Frank; "I cannot sleep till I know whether our best friends and nearest relatives are dead or alive. Josh and Dan did not see them pushed into the gulf; and Josh thinks there's a possible chance of their being alive—don't you, Josh?"

"Why, yes; but I tell you what, sir, I don't like the idea of going to that spot again."

"Neither do I," muttered Dan, with a shudder.

"I know that," said Frank, kindly, "you two have had enough of the place, certainly. But come, now," said he, turning to the others, "will two of you accompany me down Tony's ladder? If not, I will go alone."

His face glowed with the intense emotion within, and his lips curled with rising feelings of contempt, while a moment of silence confessed the hesitation of those about him.

"Then Frank Fleetwood will go alone!" repeated he, starting away from them, while his eyes flashed with indignation. Then, in a suppressed tone, in which agitation was nearly conquered, he added: "If you see me no more, don't trouble yourselves at all; I—I—"

"Hold up there, cap'n! I'm with you every time. You ought to know that, Frank, for my name is Tony Bright!"

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE MOUTH OF THE BLACK ABYSS—A HORRIBLE LAUGH.

Tony had come out of the cavern unperceived, with the rope-ladder hanging over his arm. He had caught Frank's last remark, and did not lose a moment in reminding him that he had one faithful friend who was always ready to stand by him.

"Tony, old fellow, forgive me," exclaimed Frank, grasping the brave young fellow by the hand, "I ought to have known better than to have spoken of going alone while you were here."

"That's all right, cap'n," responded Tony, heartily. "And now come on."

But Tony's example was contagious, and in an instant the others were at their side. Dan Walker and Charley being the only ones to hang back, and even they were slowly coming up.

"We can't all go," said Frank, anticipating their excuse; "some must remain behind to see that all is well here, and to keep Arty company."

"But I'm going, too, Frank!" exclaimed Arty, stoutly.

"No—no, my brave little fellow; you are the best boy in the world, and the time may come, and that, too, much sooner than we dream of, when you will have to do some pretty sharp fighting; but to-day I fear you would be more of a hindrance than a help."

"You are not very complimentary, I think, Frank," said Arty, in a grieved tone.

"You mustn't look at it in that way, my boy. The truth is, this is an undertaking in which too many must not be engaged, and of course where we can only use a few, we must have the oldest and strongest."

"All right, Frank, if that's so, I won't make any fuss; only you must promise me if the right time comes, that I may have a chance to help whip these outlaws."

"I give you that promise freely. When the right time comes you shall have all the chance in the world to help whip them."

"Good! Thank you, and now I am satisfied to stay behind."

"Then, if that little matter is settled," said Tony, somewhat impatiently, "I think we had better be starting for the mouth of the black gulf, and Dan and Charley had better accompany us that far, in order to make sure that the fastenings of the ladder are safe and secure while the rest of us are descending."

"Yes," added Tom Tracy, quickly, "and they'd better stay there, too, in order to make sure that the ladder is not tampered with while we're searching for the captain's party."

"Very well thought of, Tom," nodded Frank, approvingly; "that's a suggestion we will act upon."

"Good Lord!" muttered Charley, "have we got to stay alone in that awful place, perhaps for hours, too?"

"Don't be afraid, Charley," said Arty, reassuringly, "I'll stay with you, and I shall have my rifle and revolver handy, you may be sure."

The boys burst out laughing, and Charley, a little ashamed of his selfishness—for it was more than cowardice—started off toward the great interior cavern ahead of the whole party.

"Hold up there, Charley," called Frank; "you'll want a candle or two, I fancy, to light you on your way."

"I've got something better than candles, I'm glad to say," announced Tony, in a voice of proud satisfaction.

"What's that, old fellow?" asked Frank.

"While looking for a new supply of candles and matches, I came upon a case of splendid brass-mounted lanterns and several big cans of oil."

"Lanterns! that's splendid. But how about wicks and all that sort of thing?"

A few minutes later a dozen of the lanterns were filled, and nine of them lighted; and all other preparations being completed, the little party started for the great interior chamber at the further end of which was the mouth of the awful well-like abyss.

One or two were slightly inclined to draw back at the threshold of the great chamber, knowing as they now did, that by lower passages, running in the opposite direction, it communicated with the abode of the outlaws.

They went on, however, and as they advanced, a sudden gust of cold air swept past them with a hollow sound, and caused them to draw closer to each other.

The double sound of their footsteps reminded them that they were advancing well into the great vaulted chamber, which at least two of them now saw for the first time.

It glittered, as before; and the stones cast from their hands into the abyss beneath, did not, while they could hold their breath, announce their arrival at the water, which, in utter darkness, pursued its way through the deep foundation of that vast pile of caverned rocks.

"Now, Frank; now, Tony, what are we to do?" demanded one or two in impatient whispers.

"Wait—wait! Draw back, so that your lights may not be seen from below, and listen—listen!" returned Frank.

They did so; and the slight wind, which swept around the craggy walls and spangled dome, seemed also suppressing its breath, that they might explain their strange intrusion.

Again they breathed and listened, but now the breeze seemed to have died away; yet they could hear the faint murmur, as of a slow current of the waters in the abyss below.

They summoned new courage, and again advanced.

At that instant a strange series of cries rang out—cries raised almost into screams. The sounds rang wildly in their ears; deep answered to deep, and the exclamations they had themselves uttered, at length died into whispers, and silence reigned undisputed, save by a broken moan, which they thought might have been the fitful gust again; but in a moment a thundering plunge was heard in the black waters, far beneath, and soon after a sound resembling the attempt at a shrill laugh by one gasping at the time for breath.

In considerably less time than is usually occupied by persons retracing their steps in a dark and rugged path, they found themselves clean at the other side of the vast chamber, and ready to rush through the connecting passages into the outer cavern; but here Frank checked them.

"None of that!" he exclaimed, sternly. "We're going through with this business if all the fiends of the horrible pit rise up to oppose us!"

"The outlaws! the outlaws!" were nearly the only words the others could utter in opposition. "Oh, did you not hear their dreadful laugh?"

"Don't let that laugh worry you, my friends," said Frank, meaningly. "I know whose throat it came from. I am as sure of it as if I had been present with him. Did you not hear the peculiar catch at the end?"

"Well, whoever he is, if he can laugh, we certainly may let him alone," said Charley, quickly.

"But what do you think of the plunge, Charley?"

"A piece of the rock, I dare say; it is always falling off and tumbling about; it must be alive, I think. Come, Frank, do let us go back."

"Yes, yes, do let us go back!" cried one or two others.

"Very well," said Frank, firmly, "all the rest of you may go

back if you want to, but mind that—whatever comes of it, Tony and I are going on with what we have undertaken!"

Without another word the whole party again advanced to the brink of the black pit, to listen for any sound that might come up from the depths below.

Not a sound was to be heard; the gulf was as silent as the grave.

CHAPTER XXI.

FRANK AND HIS COMPANIONS DESCEND TO THE CAVERNS BELOW.

While the rest of the party stood silent and expectant, Frank, Tony and Josh Jopson went along the mouth of the great pit, looking for the opening into the gallery beneath them.

At length Josh discovered it, fully forty feet below, and directly under a projecting crag, about the height of Tony's head.

All being ready, those who were to go below, prepared to descend.

"Who shall be first?" asked Harry, moving slowly toward the ladder.

"I claim that honor," said Frank, promptly; but before he could reach the ladder Tony was already upon it and rapidly descending.

Each of the party was armed with a Winchester repeating rifle, two revolvers, and a long-bladed, keen-edged knife. And besides these, one or two of them carried extra weapons, to be given to their friends in case they found them and they were able to use them.

Tony reached the opening below in safety, and held the ladder for the next to descend. This was Frank, who a minute later was standing by his side.

Then came Tom Tracy, and after him Josh Jopson, Harry and Tuataga. The last having landed, Frank raised his lantern and looked searchingly about him.

"I don't much wonder, after all we have seen and heard, that some of our friends disliked the idea of such an expedition as this," he said, gravely. "Indeed, I dare say none of us enjoy it very much. We would all rather fight for our lives in open daylight than grope about here for bodies, dead or alive, in the very darkest chamber of death itself; but then again, we would rather do that, and run all hazards, than awake in the night after dreaming that our lost friends called for help and we would not answer."

"Tony," he continued, turning abruptly to the boy he could always count on, "I would sooner be a cripple, ay, without either arms or legs, so that I might but lay hold with my teeth, rather than be a coward—sooner than bear the guilt and the sufferings of the selfish, trembling wretch that will let danger drive him from his duty."

"That's all right, Frank," said his cousin, somewhat dryly; "but where are we to go to now that we are here? and if we find another infernal gulf like this one, are we to jump into it? and how long will it take us to fall to the bottom, do you think? and may we have our lanterns in our hands while we fly through the air, so that we may see our way to the water?"

"You mustn't count on me to accompany you if you resolve on any such leap as that," said Frank, quietly; "there would be nothing courageous about it, you understand—nothing but mere madness. Now hear exactly what I want to get at. I take it for granted from Josh's account that the outlaws were disturbed too soon to complete the cowardly murder of our friends. They had to leave them and go outside to fight their own family battle. Left to themselves, my father's party had a chance to escape in the recesses of this hollow mountain. They may, therefore, be lying dead or dying in some secret place; or they may yet be alive, and, with the aid that we can give them, able to escape; so let us begin our search, starting from this point, and let us pause and listen from time to time, subduing every breath, that we may hear theirs, if possible; and even if we do not find them, nor hear anything, we must not conclude that all is over with them; but if we hear a cry in a voice we know we shall be directed to the spot."

"One question right there, Frank, if you please," said Harry. "You acknowledged that you recognized the voice of the man who gave that horrible laugh. Was it one of those we are looking for?"

"It was one of those I am looking for; but it was not one of our friends."

"Ah! I understand—one of the mutineers."

"Yes, one of the mutineers."

"Which one?—not Gonzalo."

"No, not Gonzalo."

"Who, then?"

"Giuseppe Bassano."

"What! that fiend of an Italian?"

"Yes, the Italian."

Frank advanced cautiously, and the others followed.

Suddenly he raised his finger, and his companions held their breath.

There were no wild yells of outlaws or mutineers; but the galleries of the rock conveyed the audible chuckle and chatter of idiocy plainly to their ears.

By the forethought of their leader, they had all shaded their lanterns as much as possible; and now, with the least possible light to show them the way, they crawled on their hands and knees in the direction from whence the sound came, and presently reached an inner chamber of this most wonderful labyrinth. And from this, too, there was a small opening toward the gulf.

Presently they arose to their feet, and stood silently within the place. Stray rays from their shaded lanterns gleamed from the pendent stalactites of the grotto; but no sooner had the light reached them, and cast back the reflected radiance, than a wild and peculiar cry was heard, succeeded almost immediately by a wild, and still more peculiar laugh—a laugh that was enough to curdle one's blood, and fairly make his hair stand on end.

In the midst of this cry and laughter, Frank and Tony thought they had perceived the motions of two dusky objects, far apart, on a ledge of rock that was nearly invisible to most of the party.

"There he is!" suddenly exclaimed Frank, taking a step forward—"the one this way, that's Bassano!" Then raising his voice—"Bassano, isn't that you?"

"Yes, yes, cap'n, it's me,—Giuseppe Bassano—and I'll come down to you fast enough, only don't let him catch me; it's the avenging spirit of the last man I murdered. Yes, I'm coming, cap'n; see how fast I can run down the companionway—ha, ha!" and then, oh, horrible! they heard a rattling scramble, a tumble, a wild, unearthly scream, and a plunge, and then all was over.

A shudder of horror passed through the group. But before they could recover themselves, such a wild—such a peculiar—such a prolonged yell of laughter rang out, that it drove them shivering from the spot.

But quickly recovering himself, Frank again advanced, and saw the other object clambering down from his perch on the ledge of rock.

Soon he was almost close to him, and then young Fleetwood, for the first time, recognized the Haytian negro, Gabriel.

At that very instant Gabriel saw him, and with another blood-curdling laugh, made a dash at him.

Frank sprang briskly aside, and the black villain, with a yell more horrible than any he had uttered before, went tumbling into the gulf below.

"This is frightful!" cried Frank.

"Frightful," exclaimed a harsh voice. "Oh, ho, who have we here?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEADLY FIGHT IN THE GROTTO—FRANK HEARS HIS FATHER'S VOICE.

Frank Fleetwood and those with him turned quickly, and beheld a powerfully-built, swarthy-complexioned man of about fifty years of age, while behind him, eager to crowd their way into the grotto, there seemed to be no less than a dozen others.

These men were all thoroughly armed, and, at a glance, the boys saw that they meant business.

"Fools!" hissed the outlaw leader. "We'll soon show you that we stand no nonsense from any one. Let 'em have a volley, lads, hot and heavy, and then chuck what's left of 'em into the caldron!"

But almost before the words had left his lips, three or four rifle shots rang out in rapid succession, and he and two of his followers fell, either dead or mortally wounded.

Tony, Harry and Tuataga, while the outlaw leader was giving his attention to Frank and Josh, had quietly slipped around in the rear of the enemy, and so were able to get in the first and most effective blows when the time came.

The remaining outlaws, taken thus unawares, were thrown into confusion; for, owing to the multiplied echoes, it seemed to them

that the boys' party had suddenly been strongly reinforced, and Tony and those with him, taking advantage of this confusion, managed to get in half a dozen more effective shots before the enemy were able to make a move to defend themselves.

By this time their numbers were reduced to three, and Frank sternly called upon these to surrender.

They most emphatically refused, and Josh promptly shot one of them dead.

"He's the fellow that had the captain by the throat that day, when he was bound and couldn't help himself," he growled, "and I'm mighty glad to get even with him."

"Now, then, Frank," he continued, "you mustn't let either of these others escape, for it will be all day with us if you do."

"Curse you! we will escape," yelled one of the men; "or, if we don't you shall go into the bottomless pit with us," and drawing a knife, he made a desperate lunge at Josh's throat.

Both Frank and Tony fired at the same instant, and the man dropped dead, with two bullets in his brain. Almost at the same moment the last man was secured by Harry, Tom Tracy and Tuataga.

For fully a minute every one stood stock-still, and not a word was uttered; then, in a subdued voice, Frank said, "Come!" and the whole party, including the prisoner, moved out of the grotto.

They were none too soon; for they were hardly out of sight when a large party of outlaws came rushing toward the cavern they had just left.

Frank led his men deeper and deeper into the mountain until, as he suggested to Tony, they must be almost directly under their own great storehouse; and here, a little to one side, they came upon a narrow passage leading upward.

They had climbed upward some forty feet or more, when from above them there came the stern and peremptory command:

"Stop right where you are, or we fire!"

As that stern command rang down the rugged passage, Frank Fleetwood uttered a loud shout of joy.

"My father! my father!" he cried. "Alive and well, too, I am sure!"

"What! is that you, Frank?" called the voice from above. "Is it possible that I shall see your face again?"

"Yes, father, it is I, and you will not only see my face, but the faces of all those who were in the boat with me."

"Thank God!" exclaimed another voice, "then my Charley is with you."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Curtiss, Charley is quite safe, though he is not with us here. But let us come up to you, I want to see the situation there."

"Come, then," called his father, and Frank and his party again began working their way upward.

Soon the ascending party was upon the same level with those who were so impatiently awaiting their approach, and in another moment Frank was in his father's arms.

After one fond embrace, feeling how precious the time was, he drew back, and looked eagerly in the faces of the others.

"Mr. Curtiss, Mr. Botsford, Dick Brown, and Bill Morgan," he said, "all here—all but Mr. Slater, I don't see him."

"No," rejoined his father, with a sigh, "and you will never see him again. He was murdered, and that, too, in the most cowardly and heartless manner, by Gonzalo, at the spring on the small island near this."

"Then Tony was not mistaken. He thought he caught a glimpse of you, and that some of you were killed or wounded. But come, let us see what there is behind you."

The whole party, after climbing around a deep hole, moved on to the end of the passage, where a mass of loose rocks barred their further progress.

"I propose that we remove this *débris*," said Frank. "We can easily do so by passing the broken stone from one to another, and the last can cast the pieces into the deep place we crossed a little way back."

"But what shall we gain by removing that great mass of rocks?" asked his father, doubtfully.

"You will see, if you will let us get at it at once," was the answer.

"If there is any good to come of it, I say get at it, by all means," and the work was begun without further words.

At length, after more than an hour of hard labor, the captain, who was assisting Frank at the piled-up mass, uttered an exclamation of surprise and curiosity. An opening into another cavern had been revealed.

Ten minutes later the opening had been sufficiently enlarged to permit them to crawl through, one after the other.

Frank and Tony were the first to enter the newly-opened chamber; then, the prisoner having been forced through after them, the others followed.

The sight that met their gaze when they held up their lanterns and looked about them was astounding.

The chamber was not a large one, and it was well stored with iron-bound chests and cases and boxes; and some of the chests, having been left open, revealed to the wondering gaze of the beholders vast quantities of gold and precious stones.

But what thrilled them most was the fact that more than twenty dead men were scattered about on the cavern floor—dead men, who had been entombed in that place of untold wealth alive.

For some time no one spoke, and when, at length, the silence was broken, it was by the last man they expected to hear from—the prisoner.

"By the bones of Captain Kidd!" he exclaimed, "if this ain't the very spot the leaders have been searching for this long time—ever since I've been with the band—ever since the big earthquake, in fact. Lord! won't there be a jubilee when they take possession of this treasure."

"They never will take possession of it," said Frank, sternly.

"What's that? Never will? I guess you don't know them. Do you think they're going to sit down quietly and do nothing when they find that the Black Thunderbolt and the men with him don't return? Not much, they won't; they'll want to know who or what it was that wiped them out, and meet and get rid of it. For they understand very well that they will not be safe until they have done so."

"Thank you for the hint you have given me," said Frank, gravely.

"And thank you for the hint you have given me," added Tony, to himself; "I'll see to it that you don't escape to explain to your associates who or what it was that wiped out the dear departed, or to lead them to this place."

"This is wonderful—simply wonderful," murmured Harry; "and these men were shut up here by the earthquake, I suppose, and died for the want of fresh air before they could make an effort to free themselves."

"It looks like it," said Mr. Curtiss; "but how, then, is it that we find no difficulty in breathing? The hole we entered by is not sufficiently large to account for it."

Captain Fleetwood wet his finger and then put up his hand.

"Ah! I thought so," he said; "there's a draught of cold air coming from this direction. There must be a crevice in the rock over there somewhere."

Frank and Tony hurried to the point indicated, and the latter quickly gave a shout of satisfaction.

"There was a large opening here some time or other," he said; "and lately the mass of broken stones that fill it have been settling away, so that there is quite a gap up there."

"Ah! I understand," said Frank, quickly. "Our dynamite did that when we cleared the outer entrance."

"You have dynamite, then?" asked his father, thoughtfully.

"Yes, quite a good deal of it, mostly in cartridges," was the reply. "We found them in the cavern beyond this one."

"I am glad to hear it. They may prove useful. And now I would advise that we make our way out of this place."

"I fully agree with you," and the work of removing the *débris* from the filled-up entrance discovered by Tony was at once begun.

While it was in progress, Frank examined several of the chests and one or two of the dead bodies.

All at once he uttered an exclamation of astonishment and satisfaction, at the same time comparing something he held in his hand with a ring he had taken from his pocket.

"What is it? What's the matter?" asked his father and the others in a breath.

"Oh, nothing much—no matter now," said Frank, hurriedly, as he thrust the ring and whatever else he held out of sight. "Come, let's push this work; I'm anxious to get out of this."

A quarter of an hour later there was an opening large enough for Tony and Tuataga to crawl through; and they immediately went to work on the other side.

Ten minutes later the whole party emerged from the treasure-chamber and found themselves in a short passage opening into their own great storehouse. Then what a shout of triumph went up.

The first thing to do now was to secure the prisoner, and Dick Brown was constituted his jailer.

The next thing was to send a party into the inner caverns to bring back Charley, Arty and Dan Walker.

In a short time this party returned, accompanied by the trio that had watched so long and faithfully at the mouth of the black abyss. They had been thoughtful enough to pull up the rope-ladder and bring it with them.

After hearty greetings had been exchanged all around, Captain Fleetwood led Frank to one side, and for fifteen minutes held him in earnest conversation. At the end of that time Frank called to Tony to join them.

Ten minutes later, the two boys, hurrying into the storehouse, were soon busy at the cases containing the dynamite cartridges.

While they were at work here they heard two rifle shots ring out in quick succession, and hastening to ascertain the cause, found that the prisoner had managed to loosen his bonds and had attempted to escape.

Dick Brown had suffered too severely from the outlaws to have much consideration for any one of them, and so, when the fellow paid no attention to his sharp command to halt, he fired, and at the second shot the escaping villain fell dead.

"The best thing that could have happened," was Tony's concise comment as they returned to their secret work.

A little past midnight that night, Frank and Tony, each provided with a well-filled lantern, and thoroughly armed, entered the treasure-chamber, picked their way among the dead bodies, passed out at the other opening and descended into the series of caverns below.

Cautiously they advanced toward the outer caverns occupied by the outlaws, hoping, and almost believing that they might come upon them unawares.

But these men, who always carried their lives in their hands, were a cautious and cunning set, and as they could not understand how Black Thunderbolt and the men with him had met their fate, they placed a strong guard, commanded by an old Ladrone pirate, at the openings leading into the inner caverns, to guard against all danger from that direction, and the two boys stumbled upon these before they knew it.

"Halt! who goes there?" was the stern command and question, and the young adventurers came to a stand, one of them, at least, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONCLUSION.

The old Ladrone chief advanced and ordered the intruders to give an account of themselves.

For answer, Frank Fleetwood raised his right hand, on one of the fingers of which a wondrous stone gleamed, which, as it flashed and sparkled, seemed to fill the place with light.

At sight of it, the old man uttered a mingled cry of astonishment and awe, and dropping upon his knees, and bowing his head, murmured:

"What is your will, excellency?"

"Where are the treasure vaults now situated?" demanded Frank, sternly.

The old man instantly pointed them out.

"Good!" exclaimed Frank, in a tone of satisfaction; "they are far enough away from the living chambers."

"Yes, excellency," was the answer; "it was thought best that it should be so."

"And quite right, too. How many are there here at the stronghold now?"

"Less than one hundred men, excellency."

"I thought there were more."

"It was so a few days since, but one of our new captains has sailed in the *Fortuna* with fifty odd men, on a short voyage of

vengeance, and to-day we lost a leader and a dozen men in a way that is as yet unaccountable to us."

"Explain."

"They went into the dark recesses of the mountain in search of two rebels who had taken refuge there, and shortly after we heard firing. A strong party at once hurried to the scene of action, but when they arrived, not a living being could they find."

"That's very strange; we must speak of it again; but now I must proceed on a further investigation. Wait for me here."

The old man bowed humbly, and those about him stood in silent awe, while Frank and Tony proceeded on their way.

"For the Lord's sake, Frank," exclaimed Tony, when they were out of hearing, "what have you got that commands such awe and obedience from these cutthroats?"

"This ring," was the answer. "It is the signet ring of the supreme head of all the outlaws in the China seas and the Pacific Ocean, and commands more respect than any mandate from a king."

"I should say so. How in the world did you come by it?"

"Never mind that now; I'll tell you later. Let us get to work at once," and without a moment's loss of time, and without disturbing a single soul, they went about their dreadful task.

In two hours' time they had accomplished all they wished, and, passing out into the inclosure, they went down to the basin and examined the only vessel lying there—the *Vengeance*, the most beautiful craft, Frank said, he had ever seen. Evidently there was not a soul aboard of her.

There were two sentinels at their posts at the entrance to the stronghold, and, as they did not expect enemies from within, both were easily taken unawares. They were securely bound and left lying on their backs within the inclosure.

Then the boys, passing through the great gate, hastened away, as nearly as possible in the direction of their own retreat.

They had hurried on for perhaps half an hour, when all at once the ground beneath their feet trembled; then, as they turned, the very island seemed shaken to its foundations, and a stream of fire shot up, and great masses of stone filled the air, and then all was still as death.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Tony, as he gazed; "dynamite didn't do all that, Frank."

"By Jove no!" was the answer. "I forgot their powder magazine; it must have been directly behind where we placed those last cartridges."

"That's it, no doubt. Well, I wonder if any of them are left alive?"

"I very much doubt it; but the morning will tell us."

"No, Frank, don't let's wait till morning, but let's gather all hands, and, thoroughly armed, go to the basin at once."

"Perhaps you're right, Tony; maybe that's the best thing we can do," and they hurried on toward home.

They found everybody in a terrible state of excitement, and all ready for the expedition.

They started at once, and reached the outlaws' stronghold just before daylight.

Not a living soul was to be found; even the two bound sentinels who had been left in the inclosure had been crushed to death.

Captain Fleetwood and his party immediately took possession of the *Vengeance*, which was only slightly damaged by falling fragments of rock, and at once began putting her in shape to meet a formidable enemy.

In three days' time she was ready, and early the next morning, from the highest point on the island, came the signal that the enemy was in sight. Then slowly they left the basin, and shortly after, being joined by their last man, put to sea.

Soon they beheld the *Fortuna* coming down before the wind, and as she made out the *Vengeance*, she steered for her, little dreaming that the pride of the outlaws was in the hands of their most bitter enemies.

"Now, then!" exclaimed Captain Fleetwood, "wait until she is almost close upon us, and then let 'em have the whole broadside; I awfully hate to use my own ship so, but I must get even with Sanders and Gonzalo at whatever cost, and the *Vengeance* will do for me."

At length they were so near that they could make out the noseless leader of the mutineers, and the fiend of a Spaniard, Gonzalo.

"Now, then, let 'em have it!" called the captain at the top of his voice, and the broadside of guns rang out, and an unexpected result followed.

One of the shots penetrated the magazine, which had been hastily constructed on board the *Fortuna*, and in an instant the ship was blown out of the water.

A head came tumbling on the deck of the *Vengeance*, and rolled to the captain's feet. It had once rested on the shoulders of Miguel Gonzalo.

For one moment a noseless face appeared on the surface of the water, and then disappeared forever.

"Farewell to the arch-traitor, Silas Sanders," muttered Tony.

The bare head and long queue of a Chinaman for an instant was seen, and as these sank out of sight, they knew that that was the last of Chong Wing, the ship's "doctor."

A little later, the *Vengeance* was anchored in the lagoon, behind the smaller island, and the work of removing the treasure to her hold commenced.

As they were quite short-handed, it took some time to do the work; but in two weeks they set sail for San Francisco.

It required several voyages to remove all the valuable stores that the caverns contained; but they were removed at last, and all those who had gone aboard the *Vengeance* that morning when she decided the fate of the *Fortuna*, were made wealthy for life; by far the largest portion of the treasure, however, being voted to Frank and Tony.

All our friends are still alive, and enjoying their good fortune, as they deserve.

Frank and Tony now own the *Vengeance*, which they have fitted up as a pleasure yacht. And only the other day, I learned that they had started on a voyage to Oraluka, to spend some time with their old friends Taimua and Leiata, who are now ruling over a very peaceful people.

Our two brave friends do not go alone, for Dick Brown, Bill Morgan and Tom Tracy are officers of the yacht, and Harry Halstead, Tuataga and Arty Arvine are among the invited guests.

Of course these friends delight in spinning yarns on the quarter-deck of the *Vengeance*; but the stories that are most often listened to, are the brave deeds of Tony Bright in the Isle of Wonders.

THE END.

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